ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

RST AUGUST NUMBER

FEATURING

GIRL FOR NO MAN'S LAND
By JOSEPH CHADWICK

SIZE .44
By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

RANCH FLICKER TALK
By the Famous Movie Star
ROBERT CUMMINGS

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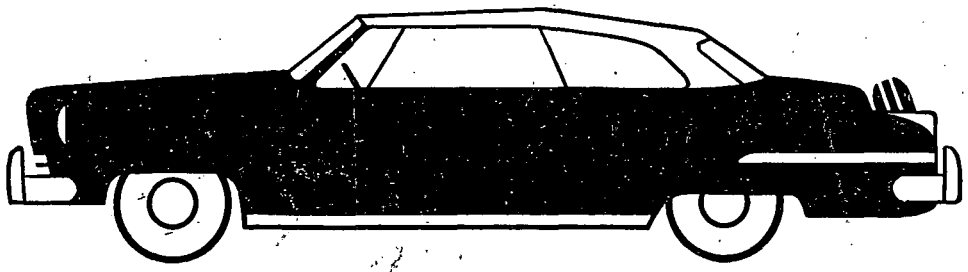
Draw This Car

Free $295.00 Art Course!

6 PRIZES! 1st: Complete $295.00 Art Course
2nd to 6th: Complete Artist's Drawing sets.



Here's your big chance, if you want to become a commercial artist, designer, or illustrator! An easy way to win FREE training from the world's greatest home study art school.

If your drawing shows promise we give you professional comments on it free! Trained illustrators, artists and cartoonists now making big money. Find out now if YOU have profitable art talent. You've nothing to lose—*everything to gain.* Mail your drawing today.

AMATEURS ONLY! Our students not eligible. Make copy of car 8 ins. long. Pencil or pen only. Omit the lettering. All drawings must be received by Sept. 30, 1953. None returned. Winners notified.

ART INSTRUCTION, INC., Dept. 7633
500 S. 4th, Minneapolis 15, Minn.

Please enter my attached drawing in your Draw a Car contest. **(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name_____ Age____

Address_____ Phone____

City_____ Zone____ County____

State_____ Occupation____

What really happens when you draw this car?

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE ABOVE ADVERTISEMENT

If you *enjoy* drawing or sketching, some of America's top art teachers are waiting to hear from you, right now!

For there are unfilled art jobs in many fields, today. And these experts are trained to find talented beginners, and then teach them until they are capable of taking well-paid art jobs.

When your drawing of the car (above) arrives at the school, it is carefully studied, *not to see how perfectly it is drawn, but to see whether it indicates a natural aptitude for art!*

Then, a complete art course is awarded to the person whose drawing shows the most talent and promise. This art education is equivalent to a full 2-year scholarship in an away-from-home school. The only difference is that lessons arrive by mail, and winners attend "art classes" at their own convenience in their own home.

The step-by-step lessons cover everything from Basic Drawing, up through Magazine and Advertising Illustration. There's a separate course in Cartooning, too. Each lesson is the work of a widely known authority in the field, with contributions by 40 of the country's top commercial artists, illustrators, and cartoonists.

And when the winner masters this training he'll be ready for a career in art. He'll be ready for one of the well-paid art jobs now open in television, advertising, publishing, and dozens of other fields.

How do we know?

Because in 39 years we've trained thousands of artists including some of the most successful in the country!

So hadn't you better get out a pencil and draw that car?

(Now read this again!)

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HERE'S PROOF THAT YOU CAN DOUBLE YOUR INCOME BY 1963

Just imagine what you could do with *twice* your present income! While you're still young, you could afford luxuries usually associated with success . . . $65 suits . . . $18,000 home . . . security for your family . . . respect from your friends.

If you're like the average I. C. S. graduate surveyed this year, *you'll actually be making twice your present income by 1963!*

FROM $2,514.63 TO $5,114.84

This is about what you can expect I. C. S. to do for you *if you are an average student.* With a little extra effort, you'll be even better off!

391 subjects to choose from. I. C. S. courses cover practical, everyday subjects in a practical, easy-to-follow way. You use your spare time — time that others waste — to acquire knowledge worth thousands of dollars to business and industry. If you want to be twice as well off in 1963 as you are today, mail the coupon below.

***Get Expert Guidance with* 2 FREE BOOKS.** By return mail, you get complete catalog on the career you check. Also 36-page pocket-size guide, "How to Succeed." Both free! Just mark the coupon.

She's holding a sheaf of reports from I. C. S. ten-year graduates. This group alone shows an average pay increase of 103%. You can match it!

Returns from 21 states . . . from accountants, draftsmen, engineers, technicians . . . show the following important facts about your expected income over a ten-year period.

	Age 30	Age 40	% Increase
Average income for all U.S. men	$2,449.00	$2,845.00	16%
Average income for college graduates (men)*	$3,537.00	$4,618.00	30%
Average income for 41 I. C. S. graduates surveyed Jan. '53	$2,514.63 before I. C. S. training	$5,114.84 today	103%

* From "They Went to College," Haverman & West

NOTE: The *average* man or woman will put off mailing this coupon till later. Consider yourself *above average* if you do it now.

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ICS

BOX 3966-B, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the booklet about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

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- ☐ Magazine and Book Illustrating
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating

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- ☐ Auto-Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing
- ☐ Diesel—Gas Engines

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Engine Mechanic
- ☐ Airplane Drafting

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- ☐ Arch. Drafting
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- ☐ Carpenter Foreman
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- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
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- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
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- ☐ Railroad Administration

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- ☐ Textile Engineering
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City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Occupation_____

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29th Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST AUGUST NUMBER

July 31, 1953
Volume 180, Number 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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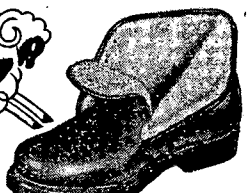
MAKE BIG MONEY

WITH FAST-SELLING WARM MASON LEATHER JACKETS

Rush Coupon for FREE Selling Outfit!

NOW IT'S EASY to make BIG MONEY in a profit-making, spare-time business! As our man in your community, you feature Mason's fast-selling Horsehide, Capeskin, Suede, other fine leather jackets — nationally known for smart styling, rugged wear, wonderful warmth. Start by selling to friends and fellow workers. Think of all the outdoor workers around your own home who will be delighted to buy these fine jackets from you: truck drivers, milkmen, cab drivers, gas station, construction men — hundreds in your own community! You'll be amazed how quickly business grows. And no wonder! — You offer these splendid jackets at low money-saving prices people can afford! Our top-notch men find it's easy to make up to $10.00 a day EXTRA income!

SHOE AND LEATHER JACKET ARE BOTH LINED WITH WARM SHEEPSKIN!



Be the first to sell men who work outdoors this perfect combination!— Non-scuff, warm Horsehide leather jacket lined with wooly Sheepskin—and new Horsehide work shoe also warmly lined with fleecy Sheepskin and made with oil-resisting soles and leather storm welt!

These Special Features Help You Make Money From First Hour!

• • • Men really go for these warm Mason jackets of long-lasting Pony Horsehide leather, fine Capeskin leather, soft luxurious Suede leather. You can even take orders for Nylon, Gabardine, 100% Wool, Satin-faced Twill jackets, men's raincoats, too! And just look at these EXTRA features that make Mason jackets so easy to sell:

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- Extra-large pockets!
- Variety of colors for every taste: brown, black, green, grey, tan, blue!

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Take orders for Nationally-advertised, Velvet-eez Air-Cushion Shoes in 150 dress, sport, work styles for men and women. Air-Cushion Innersole gives wonderful feeling of "walking on air." As the Mason man in your town, you feature more shoes in a greater range of sizes and widths than the largest store in town! And at low, direct-from-factory prices! It's easy to fit customers in the style they want — they keep re-ordering, too — put dollars and dollars into your pocket! Join the exceptional men who make up to $200 extra a month and get their family's shoes and garments at wholesale prices!

Send for FREE SELLING OUTFIT Today!

Mail coupon today — I'll rush your powerful Free Jacket and Shoe Selling Outfit including 10-second Air-Cushion Demonstrator, and EVERYTHING you need to start building a steady, BIG MONEY, repeat-order business, as thousands of others have done with Mason!

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Name.....

Address.....

Age.....

Town.....State.....

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Pert Little Gal

Dear Editor:

How about swinging open the gate for me? I'm 5'2", eyes of blue, with rusty-colored hair. I'm a pert little gal of 17 who loves anything hillbilly. I have two fan clubs for hillbilly singers. I want to hear from all you guys and gals, and especially servicemen. So come on, everybody, write—and I'll answer. Fill up this gal's mail box and her heart.

JANE WARREN

R.F.D. #2
Titusville, Pa.

Keep Him Busy

Dear Editor:

I'm stuck here in the hospital for a long time and it gets very lonely. It would sure help to pass the time if I had someone to keep me answering letters. I'm an Air Force staff sergeant, 21 years old, blue eyes and blond hair and I'm 5'8". I like classical music, ballet, boxing and deer hunting, plus many other things. Hope you can help me out.

S/Sgt. DON H. BANNING

Brooke Army Hospital
Annex 4, Ward 26
Ft. Sam Houston, Texas

A Guy From Ohio

Dear Editor:

How about letting a guy from Ohio into your circle? I'm 5'6" tall and have black hair and brown eyes. I like most all kinds of sports, especially baseball and football. I would like to hear from people from 20 years up to 50 years So fill up my mail box; I will answer every letter I receive.

ROBERT GREEN

Rt. # 2
Continental, Ohio

Room for One More

Dear Editor:

Is there a little corner where you can put this plea in? I'm married and have a four-year-old son. I'm 5'2" tall, brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are collecting songs, fancywork and writing letters, which is my favorite. I have lots of time on my hands so come on and write me a few lines. Will write to everyone.

MRS. RITA GIESBRECHT

623 15th Ave.
New Westminster, B.C.
Canada

Lonely Marine

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Marine presently assigned to Buenos Aires. My characteristics are: brown hair, blue eyes, height 5'9", weight 160 lbs., 20 years old. I would appreciate hearing from people my own age, and promise to answer all letters I may receive. Urgently awaiting results.

CPL. WILLIAM SIMPSON

American Embassy
Buenos Aires, Argentina

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Melody Maker

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to catch the plane for pen pals in Our Air Mail. I am 21, 6'1" and weigh 173. I like all sports, and song writing. I would like to hear from girls and boys 16 through 21 years of age. I'll try to answer every letter I receive. So come on, gang, keep me busy. I've got plenty of time for writing to you.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

301 West Central Ave., Moultrie, Ga.

Lovely Young Widow

Dear Editor:

I would love to have some pen pals. I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a long time now. I am 21 years old, a widow, am 5'6" tall, weigh, 101, blonde, natural curly hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion that only a Swede could have. My hobbies are photography; collecting poems, photostamps and the like; I love hillbilly, Western, and semi-classical music. I must have two serious operations soon so you see I need cheering up. I will answer all letters and will exchange snapshots. Here's hoping!

MRS. KATHRYN H. JOHNSON

Rt. 1, Box 57
Leonard, Minn.

Trying for "Hitched" Friends

Dear Editor:

I tried quite some time ago to get my letter into your pen pal column but nothing came of it. I am trying again, and I hope this time I get results. I am 22, married, have brown hair and blue eyes and am 5'4". Would especially like to hear from other young married women, here in the United States or other countries. Some of the things I enjoy doing in my spare moments are writing letters, reading, crocheting, dancing, roller-skating, and singing—for my own benefit. I will exchange photos with all who write so come on you young hitched gals and drop me a line. I'll do my best to answer all letters received.

MRS. CAROLYN PUTZEL

General Delivery
Cottonwood, Calif.

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She's Different!

Dear Editor:

This is a second generation pen pal calling. My mother enjoys your column so much that I got the bug and now I can't get enough letters. I am 17 years old and go to college in Manhattan. I like sports, movies, reading and, of course, letters. I have brown hair—and just to be different I have a brown speck in one of my blue eyes. I prefer hearing from those around my own age. My dad was once a cowboy, so how about some of you Westerners dropping me a line? We hope to go out West some day and maybe I'll get a chance to meet some real Western folks. Yours for bigger 'n better letters.

JOAN JANIAK

354 Central Ave.
Brooklyn 21, N.Y.

Seeking His Relatives

Dear Editor:

This is my second try to have my letter published. I am a widower, age 66, 5'8" tall and weigh 200 lbs. I would like to have correspondents from 50 years and up. Also (since they are scattered) if any members of Henry Derick's family see this, I would like to hear from them. But I'll write to anyone.

HARRY DERICK

187 N. 4th St.
Hughesville, Pa.

Home-Town Pride

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping you will do someone a great favor and find some room in your column for a 26-year old fellow who would like very much to make some new friends. My home town has a wonderful historical background, as well as being the present President's home town. Just a few of my hobbies are reading, letter-writing, gardening, art, music, and traveling. It would be fun to make some new friends to share some of these interests. I'm considered intelligent, have a pleasant disposition, and I am interested in people. So come on, friends, do your best to fill my mail box.

VERNON BOHLING

512 SW 2nd St.
Abilene, Kansas

GI In Korea

Dear Editor:

I am a GI in Korea who is really lonely. I am 5'6½" tall, have black hair and brown eyes. I would like to hear from girls from 16 to 18. I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for some time now and I like it. I would apppreciate it if you would kindly print this plea for me.

PVT. JACK D. STRAUSS

RA 173 486 30
CO. C 62 Eng. Const. Btn.
A.P.O. 301 c/o PM
San Francisco, Calif.

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you realize what hard jobs our men are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men — whenever you invest in Defense Bonds. For Bonds strengthen our economy — to produce the arms and food and care that make our men secure."

Peace is for the strong! For peace and prosperity save with U. S. Defense Bonds!

Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all *maturing* E Bonds automatically *go on* earning—at the new rate—for 10 *more* years. Today, start investing in U. S. Series E Defense Bonds through the **Payroll Savings Plan** at work.

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* Short Story
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* Feature

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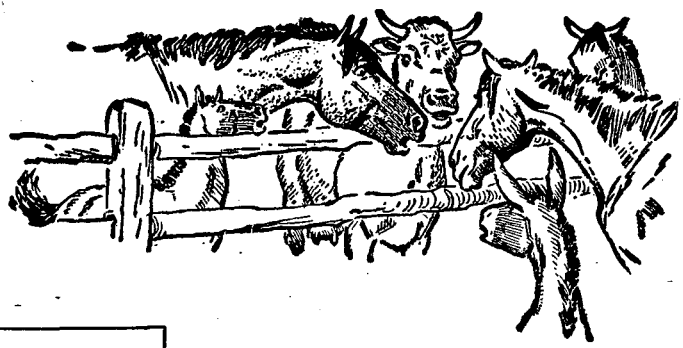
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

IN OKLAHOMA CITY a citizen struck a match to investigate some trouble in his home. When he woke in the hospital they told him the trouble had been a gas leak.

ANOTHER it's-a-man's-world? note comes in from Albuquerque, where a woman has been named head of the New Mexico Hereford Growers Ass'n.

OUT IN Pilot Rock, Ore., the furor has died down since a 2½-year-old, lost for many hours, turned up reading a comic book in the unlocked home of a neighbor.

IN OKANOGAN, Wash., while the city council pondered whether or not to charge citizens for using the city dump, an enterprising resident went ahead on his own and, using their tentative plan, cleaned up at the dump before clearing out of town.

IN AURORA, Colo., where the good neighbor policy is rampant, a lady saw the house next door afire, called the fire department, and played her own hose on the flames, saving considerable damage. When the flames died down she was handed a summons for using a hose when there was a fire alarm—illegal in that city.

ANYONE SEEING RED out around Marysville, Calif., is probably reading sign on the 48-foot fire truck which was mislaid in delivery between New York and that town. . . . In Los Angeles three youngsters on roller skates snatched a lady's purse and wheeled gracefully off before she could say, "Hey, there!"

IN NEILLSVILLE, Wis., when a lady presented her husband with their fourth set of twins in six years, he had only one thing to say: "I just don't know what to say."

A CHIHUAHUA INDIAN from El Paso, Tex., traveled forty miles to collect a $25 reward for a weather balloon. Since he spent all his money for the journey he has to sit tight in Juarez till the Air Force makes good the reward.

A RECENT REPORT from Phoenix proves that cattle rustling in Arizona has reached a new high—proving that the wild days haven't died altogether.

IN SEATTLE, Wash., someone who knew he'd probably never get her in the flesh made off with a 7-foot cardboard image of Rita Hayworth.

FROM SAN ANTONIO comes the report of a GI who was almost thrown into the guard house for saying his name was Pvt. Joe Blow—which it was.

IN BUTTE, Mont., a tavern was looted by some high-minded burglars who took ninety autographed dollar bills which had been attached to the ceiling.

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RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

Ramrodding Western film talk for RANCH ROMANCES' readers is Hollywood star Robert Cummings. Top-hand in many a Western himself, Bob is well fitted to slap his critical brand on films with most appeal for lovers of Western lore.

Bob, born in Missouri, charmed Broadway audiences long before he got his first lead in the Westerns which brought him fame. Now star of NBC-TV's MY HERO, Bob says films, radio, TV and the stage keep him hopping—but he still finds time to relax on the home range with his wife and three children.

The Man From the Alamo

Universal-International put drama, excitement, and comedy together in this Technicolored Old West saga. . . .

UNTIL recently Glenn Ford considered himself a "blue-suiter." This is the sort of character who acts tough in modern dress, which is much easier, he says, than acting tough in stetson and boots.

Glenn currently is playing in *The Man From the Alamo,* a story based on the theory that one soldier escaped from the Alamo. Universal-International script writers took off from there, devising as noble a reason for a man to leave his post as you can imagine.

The soldier, John Stroud, is sent on a mission to prevent a similar massacre from happening in a nearby town. But he arrives too late; almost the entire town has been wiped out, including John's own wife and son, and he is branded a coward and thrown into jail for desertion.

The one survivor of the town is a Mexican lad who provides John with a clue to identifying the marauders. The chase is a long and tricky one, but finally he succeeds in exposing a renegade gang, and thus saves his own reputation.

Glenn has starred in more than twenty movies, but he never had a part as rough as this one. All horse operas, he claims, are hard on actors.

"Once you put on Western clothes," said Glenn, "it's a fight to the death, or the audience won't be satisfied. In a modern setting, just one haymaker looks like real action; but a Western setting calls for a real beating for both the hero and the villain."

And Glenn really took a beating in *The Man From the Alamo.* He got through his fist fights all right, but he was so determined to measure up as a Western hero that he refused to use a double in a riding scene. Result: three broken ribs for Glenn and a concrete patch on the tree he was pitched into. Before the cement was dry, incidentally, a back lot comedian commemorated the accident. The patch on the tree now reads:

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"Glenn Ford landed here, unaccompanied, Sept. 16, 1952."

Julia Adams, who plays opposite Glenn, has now made seven Westerns in a row. "It's getting so I feel immodest in my own clothes," she said—and this is the girl whose legs were once voted the most beautiful in America!

She told me about a scene in which she had to jump on a speeding wagon and shoot some pursuing horsemen.

"Believe it or not, the director, Budd Boetticher, said I looked too ladylike."

The scene was rehearsed over and over again, but Julia kept getting more expert and thus even calmer doing it.

Finally Budd got an idea. "Come on," he said, and he led her to a 30-foot square sandpit where stuntmen warm up. "Run around in there for a while," he ordered.

Ten minutes later she was breathless and disheveled, and she did the scene before she had a chance to recover her poise.

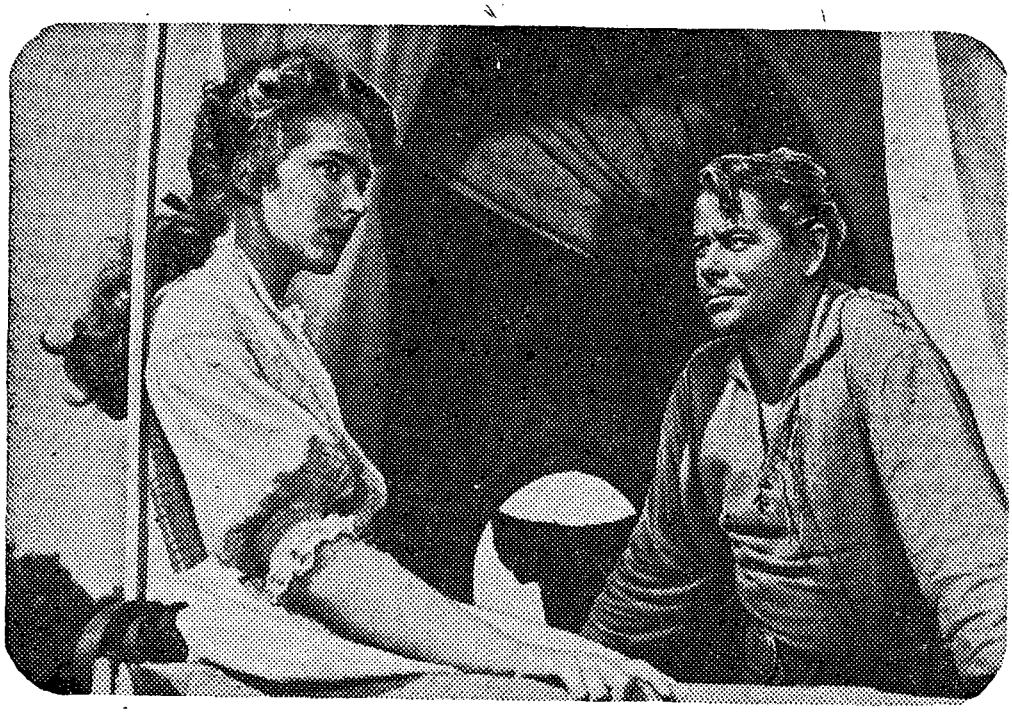
Chief of the badmen in *The Man From the Alamo* is Victor Jory, who got started as a villian back in 1919, curling his lip at himself in a bathroom mirror. He claims that he's one of those guys who is a natural contrast to the handsome hero.

"I looked at myself in that mirror and decided I was meant to be a heavy," he said. "I decided to make a fine art of sneering," and he adds with a grin, "I defy anyone to sneer me off the screen."

Assisting him in villainy is Hugh O'Brien, who was completely taken aback when he found that his part called for him to kiss a girl—for the first time before the cameras. Rather hesitantly he asked the director how to go about it.

Budd looked at him in astonishment. "How old are you, anyway?" he roared. So Hugh just did what came naturally.

The Man From the Alamo isn't all good and evil. There's comedy, too, supplied by Chill Wills, who was glad to get his voice back after lending it so often to Francis the mule. "I'm afraid," said Chill, "audiences are going to find my face a shock—and in Technicolor too!"



Glenn Ford and Julia Adams in a thoughtful moment

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FAITH DOMERGUE
Sultry Beauty

RANCH FLICKER TALK

IT TOOK one glance from producer Howard Hughes to get a movie contract for Faith Domergue, and after that it took ten years for her to make her debut.

Faith thinks she set a record for being kept under wraps. She was only sixteen when she reported to RKO and signed her name to a contract. And then began the longest build-up in Hollywood history.

"All that time," says Faith, "I wasn't just sitting around twiddling my thumbs. I had to finish my general education with a private tutor, who always knew if you hadn't done your homework. I studied voice, diction and drama, besides. But the worst thing was that I lisped.

"For a solid year I would read, read, read," Faith recalls. "Everything from the Gettysburg Address to 'She sells sea shells by the sea shore.' It was a hard fight, but I won."

Finally RKO unveiled its sultry beauty, and in the two years since, Faith has made four pictures. Her first two showed her as an exotic charmer, as Howard Hughes had intended. When Universal Pictures producers saw her, they immediately borrowed her to play wholesome young women in Westerns.

The Great Sioux Uprising with Jeff Chandler is her latest, and now Faith is afraid she may be typed as a Sunbonnet Sue.

"I guess gals in Hollywood are never satisfied," she says. "When I was studying I thought playing *any* part would be pure heaven. When I got my terrific build-up as a sultry star, I thought, oh if I could only be a nice girl! Now that I've done two Westerns, I think, oh if I could only go back to those old sultry roles again."

In private life, however, Faith doesn't change her mind—not about important things anyway. She picked her husband out at a party, before she'd ever met him.

"I saw this interesting-looking man across the room," and somebody told me he was an Italian director named Hugo Fregonese. So I just kept edging toward him until somebody introduced us, and I married him three months and one day later."

They've been married for five years now, and have two children, a boy and a girl. They live in a modern duplex, which they share with Faith's parents. "No baby-sitter problem for us," laughs Faith.

Actually, the Fregoneses seldom need a baby-sitter, since they're not gadabouts. Faith regards nightclubs with extreme distaste, but she does enjoy small parties in her friends' homes.

She loves animals to the extent of owning two dachshunds, a Pekingese, a cocker spaniel and a Siamese cat. She wants a pet snake, having had what she describes as "a lovely non-poisonous Coral King," when she was a child in New Orleans. Her husband put his foot down. He told her if she collected snakes, he'd collect spiders. That settled that.

Except for her fondness for snakes, Faith is fairly non-exotic in real life. She's a little shy and a little superstitious, and always good-natured except when somebody throws a hat on the bed.

She loves Hollywood and nearly everyone who works there. "People seem smart, informal and friendly," she says. Everyone who knows her likes Faith, too. One of her friends put it this way: "How can you help liking a girl who wears built-in rose-colored glasses?"

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(Universal)

Faith looks at the world through rose-colored glasses

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for No Man's Land

THE EX-TEXAS RANGER with a blot on his name found more than he bargained for when he trailed a killer into forbidden territory

AFTER THE TROUBLE at San Marco, when a bank robber escaped from custody because of my negligence, I wrote out my resignation and mailed it to Company B headquarters. But it wasn't until reaching Beaver Creek, where it made one of its crossings of the boundary between Texas and No Man's Land, that I realized my badge was still pinned to my shirt.

I'd stopped to water my horses—the dun gelding I rode and the sorrel mare carrying my pack—and to slake my own thirst. I bellied down to drink and there was my reflection in the water, with the silver star glinting bright—and mocking me.

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

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I forgot my thirst, got to my feet, and in a sudden temper ripped off the badge. I was done with the Texas Rangers, and they were done with me. I didn't want any reminder that I'd ever been a Ranger, so I flung the badge out into the water. The next instant I swore, and waded in after it. As I fished it out, a voice laughed, and someone called out to me.

"That's right, friend. Don't get rid of it. But if you're riding into the Neutral Strip, don't be fool enough to wear it."

He'd stepped from among some big rocks on the opposite side of the creek, a hard-case with a rifle in the crook of his arm. He belonged on that side, the side away from Texas. At least, he had the mark of a man belonging to that wild country

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known sometimes as the Neutral Strip and sometimes as No Man's Land. It was a harsh, wild land, and this man was rugged and gaunt and treacherous looking. He wasn't much physically, being of only medium height and lean as a whip and only a little better dressed than a granger's scarecrow. But the grin on his bristly face was nasty, and his eyes were sly and mean. He moved from the rocks to his side of the creek, moving with a lazy man's shuffle, and spat tobacco juice into the water.

"Ranger badge, eh?"

I said, "Yeah. But it doesn't mean anything."

"How so?"

"I quit the Rangers."

His grin stretched wider, showing that he didn't believe me. "Hanks is my name. Will Hanks," he said. His grin was lopsided because of his tobacco cud. "I know the Strip like I know the palm of my right hand. If you need any help, just say so."

I'd long ago learned not to form an opinion of any man at first sight, but I found myself disliking Will Hanks, and

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distrusting him. "Why should you want to help me?"

"It must be something big, or a Ranger wouldn't be going into the Strip."

"I told you I've quit the Rangers."

He ignored that, and said, "And if it's something big, there must be a bounty on somebody's hide. All I'd want is a slice of the reward."

A Ranger learns that help is where he finds it, and usually it's in the damnedest places. I wasn't one anymore, but I knew I was going to need help. While thinking about Will Hanks and his offer, I went to my horses. I mounted the dun, caught up the sorrel's halter rope, and forded the creek. I reined in facing Hanks. I was still undecided about him, and what finally decided me about him was my not being too familiar with No Man's Land. I'd crossed it once, to get to Kansas a couple years before, but I didn't really know the country.

I said, "I don't know about collecting any reward, but there's one offered for the man I'm after. His name's Tom Duane, and he headed up this way about a week ago—riding hard. He's a young fellow, in his early twenties—blond hair, blue eyes, five feet ten, a hundred sixty pounds. I want him, Hanks."

"How much bounty on him?"

"Five hundred."

"How?"

"Alive," I said, making my voice rough. "I don't want him dead."

HANK'S JAWS worked on the tobacco cud, and his eyes were thoughtful. "If he's got to be taken alive, how do you figure on taking him out of the Strip? Shanghai him out?"

"Let me worry about that."

"If this gets out, you'll have every outlaw in No Man's Land on your trail, gunning for you. You know that?"

"This is personal with me. When I said I'd quit the Rangers, I told you the truth. I know what happens when a lawman comes into the Strip, but I'm no longer a lawman." I paused, saw that he was still skeptical. I added, "Like I said, I want him alive. If I get him back to Texas and collect a reward, I'll split it with you—if you help me locate him."

He looked surprised, showing that he hadn't expected so big a share of the reward. No Man's Land being what it was, a half of five hundred dollars was a lot of money. After a moment, Will Hanks said, "Ranger, you've got yourself a partner. I'll ride a little way with you."

He disappeared among the rocks, then came out riding a roan horse. There was one thing about the denizens of No Man's Land; they might live in sod houses, eat poor and wear shoddy clothes, but they were always well mounted. Will Hanks was no exception. His roan was a stocky gelding that looked as though it could carry him a long way in a hurry. He swung alongside me, and we rode north into the Strip. We didn't talk for a while. I was lost in my gloomy thoughts. He was chewing—and thinking.

I knew he was thinking because he said, after a couple of miles, "Duane—I got it now. He was in on that big bank robbery down at San Marco, Texas. Him and three other hombres. They got thirty thousand, and killed the sheriff while making their getaway." He twisted in the saddle, staring at me. His eyes were excited. "A Ranger caught one of them—this Duane—but later Duane escaped. The Ranger's name was—Bannister."

"News gets into the Strip, doesn't it?"

"News like that, yeah. You're Bannister?"

"I'm Bannister."

"Now I half believe you quit the Rangers," Hanks said, chuckling. "The way I heard it, there was talk that you'd let Duane escape in the hope that you'd share in the loot." A greedy look appeared in his eyes. "Thirty thousand— Look, did Duane skip without cutting you in?"

I swore. "Cut that kind of talk, Hanks."

"Sure, sure. Duane didn't have any of the loot on him when you arrested him?"

"No. One of the others carried it, and the four separated after the holdup because there was a posse on their heels. Duane never got a cent of the loot, and he won't

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unless he manages to locate his partners."

"They headed this way?"

"Mexico."

"Then how come he came into the Strip?"

"He just wanted out," I said. "He's an amateur; the others were professionals. Tom Duane just got in with bad company."

Hanks was silent for a time, thinking again. Then he suddenly reined in, and when I halted, he said, "I've got a lot of friends scattered through the Strip. I'll pass the word around, and it won't be long before I hear something of Duane. When I hear, where will I find you?"

I let myself look uncertain for a minute, then said, "I know a cowman named Matt Cameron. I was figuring on going to his camp on Squaw Creek and asking him for help. You'll find me there, I guess. If I'm not there, hang around until I get back."

"All right," said Hanks. "Give me two or three days, eh?"

"Yeah. And remember, I don't want Duane harmed."

Hank spat, grinned, said, "I've got a good memory," and turned away.

I watched him ride off, heading east, and I wondered if I'd handled him right. I hadn't had much choice, of course, after he spotted my Ranger badge. And anyway, I was rid of him for a few days. Besides, I hadn't told him too much. A Ranger learns not to be too truthful with Will Hanks's kind. I watched him out of sight far across the empty flats, then I made a beeline for Matt Cameron's cow camp on the Squaw. I didn't know Matt Cameron from Adam, but Tom Duane did—and if I was lucky I'd find the bank robber there.

IT WAS HAZY DUSK before I found Cameron's camp, but I came upon a small stream in some wild, broken country and I figured it must be Squaw Creek. I went into camp, and after I'd eaten, I sat by my dying fire and smoked a cigarette. I'd located between the creek and some craggy bluffs, and there was a lot of brush surrounding the spot—grapevines, wild currant and plum bushes. It was bright moonlight, and the sky was full of stars. I heard the eerie call of some sort of night bird, and far-off a coyote howled. Maybe it wasn't any different from the lonelier parts of Texas, but my knowing it was No Man's Land made me feel like a stranger in a mighty strange land.

No Man's Land was one hundred and sixty-seven miles long and thirty-four and one-half miles across, and it had Texas on the south, Kansas and Colorado on the north, New Mexico to the west and Indian Territory to the east. When the Congress of the United States fixed the boundaries of the Western States and Territories, the land had been forgotten, so it was beyond the jurisdiction of any government, courts, or peace officers. It was therefore a haven for lawless men—and for the loose women and shady men who were the hangers-on of outlaws.

Some homesteaders had ventured into the country, but they had a rough time of it; their unfiled claims were shaky, and both the outlaws and the cattlemen gave them trouble. Quite a few cow outfits had moved into the Strip from Texas. There were several grubby towns—Beaver City, Hardesty, Gate City, Neutral City—and the notorious outlaw town, Sod Town. Mostly, it was sand dunes, sagebrush, grass flats, brush thickets. There were no trees other than an occasional grove of cottonwoods and, near the sand flats, brakes of cedar. Like the spot where I was camped, there were numerous stretches of rocky, eroded terrain. It was often called the Neutral Strip, but it didn't feel neutral to me. It was big and wild and lonely, sure. But I could feel something more: its hostility.

My fire died to a handful of embers, and I spread my bedroll. I moved my saddle over for a pillow, so that my Winchester, in the saddleboot, was handy. I removed my hat, boots, and gun-rig, then crawled into my blankets. I lay there wide awake, thinking of the man I was after, and hoping he would lead me to his partners in crime. There was a chance that he would, for despite what I'd told Will Hanks, Duane's partners hadn't gone to Mexico. I was pretty sure of that. I figured that they too

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had come into No Man's Land. But I didn't want Hanks to know that, for if he got the smell of that thirty thousand dollars in bank loot, he would be sure to go after it and mess things up for me.

I was beginning to grow drowsy when I heard a sound—a furtive sound, like somebody sneaking up on my camp.

I rolled from my blankets and, taking my gun-rig with me, crawled to some bushes. Once in the brush, I rose to my knees and buckled on the rig. I eased the gun out of its holster, cocked it, then peered around. The moon gave plenty of light, but here by the creek there were more patches of shadow than of light—and if there was anybody injuning toward me, he was hidden in some dark spot. I waited, my heart pounding.

The night was warm, but the heat didn't explain the sweat that broke out on me. I knew one thing then: a man could spend nearly ten years as a Ranger and still know fear on occasion.

This was such an occasion. I knew somebody was nearby, and, maybe because this was No Man's Land, I could think only that it was somebody after me. It occurred to me that maybe I'd been outsmarted, that Hanks was a friend of Tom Duane's and had been posted at the Texas line to watch for me and now he, or Duane, was trying to get me off the trail. I hadn't paid any attention to my backtrail after parting with Will Hanks; and even if I had watched it, he could have tracked me. I began to think it would be that hardcase rather than Duane, for young Tom Duane wouldn't be much good at bushwhacking. I still saw nobody, and for maybe five minutes there was no sound. Then I heard something.

It was a splashing of water.

I turned, snaked through the brush thicket, came to the creek bank. I peered downstream, but saw nothing. Upstream, it was different. I saw a figure there, in the shadow of a big cottonwood tree. I eased from the brush, my gun ready, and moved along the bank. I was just about to call a challenge—with my gun leveled—when the figure moved farther out into the stream, and into the moonlight.

The water was shallow, only midway up to the knees, so I had a clear view of my bushwhacker. Only it wasn't a bushwhacker. It wasn't even a man. A girl was there in the creek, soaping herself, taking a bath.

She looked up and saw me, and shrieked.

But she wasn't any more startled than I was. In all my years as a Ranger, nothing like this had ever happened to me!

THINKING it over later, I realized that I shouldn't have stood there gawking—but I told myself too that I couldn't be blamed for my gawking. I was no wooden Indian. The girl moved first, and fast. She'd no sooner shrieked than she dropped her cake of soap and darted toward the bank. I started to move away then, and a moment later I had to move fast, too, for all of a sudden a rifle cut loose—three times, in fast succession.

The slugs ripped through the brush probing for me. I sprinted toward my camp, two more shots racketing behind me. I ducked down behind a boulder, and by then I began to feel plenty foolish. I'd been shot at before, but never for such a reason as this. And never by a woman.

The shooting stopped, and after a full minute I heard a man yell, "Jan! Jan, what's happened? Jan, you all right?"

It was still night. Voices carried far, and the girl didn't keep hers down any more than the man. I heard her call out, "Keep away! I—I'm not decent!"

"What was all the shooting?"

"Some crazy galoot was watching me!"

The man said something I didn't catch.

But I heard the girl say, at the top of her lungs, "No you won't, either! You want him to shoot you! And keep away from here till I get dressed!"

After that there was quiet for a couple of minutes, then there was only a murmur of voices without any words reaching me. I figured that she'd got dressed and the man had joined her. Soon there was nothing at all to hear and I knew they'd moved away from the creek—back to their camp, I supposed. I rolled and lighted a cigarette, and thought about it while I smoked. I chuckled over it, but I no longer felt safe camped

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there. So I gathered my gear together, saddled my horses, and moved downstream about a mile. The rest of the night was real quiet, and when morning came I woke up wondering if I hadn't just dreamed it.

I washed up and shaved at the creek, remembering the girl all the while. I hadn't got such a good look that I knew what she was really like, but, my mind being no different than any male's, I imagined she was something special. I wondered if she was somebody's wife, then decided that she wasn't because of the way she'd warned off the man who came running after the shooting. She hadn't talked to him as if he were her husband.

As for me, I was a bachelor—thirty-one, six-feet-one, a hundred-eighty pounds, sandy hair, gray eyes. I saw my reflection in the water as I scraped with my razor. A woman would have to like a rugged man to find me attractive. Still, I wasn't downright ugly and my shoulders and chest were corded with muscle. What I lacked in beauty, I made up for with brawn.

After cleaning up, I built a fire and cooked my breakfast. I quit thinking about the girl while eating and wondered if I'd find Tom Duane at the Cameron camp. I wasn't fooling myself. It was certain that if I found him there, I'd have trouble with Matt Cameron as well as with Duane. I found myself wondering too if Cameron might have been in on the robbery with Duane. I decided against it, for Matt Cameron was well known down around San Marco, Texas, once having had a ranch near there, and from what folks told me he was a square shooter. But even if he was that, it was still likely that he would stand by Duane. It was like that in the Southwest; outlaws always had friends among the law-abiding citizens, and those friends sometimes made things tough for lawmen.

When I broke camp and rode out, I headed upstream and soon passed the spot where I'd first stopped last night and the spot where I'd seen the girl. A little farther on, I came to the end of the rough stretch and there, around a bend of the creek, was a broad grass flat and some sod buildings. The buildings were within easy walking distance of the place where I'd spotted the girl, so I knew she'd come from there. I wondered if it was Matt Cameron's place.

It was on the opposite side of the creek, so I made the crossing. There were cattle scattered across the flat in the distance, and nearer, in a fenced meadow, were a dozen horses. There were a couple more horses in a corral off from one of the buildings, a barn, and a wagon without a team stood at the other side. A man appeared at the doorway of the barn and watched me approach. He was an elderly Mexican. He held a double-barreled shotgun, and its twin muzzles bored at me as I rode into the ranch yard.

"That's far enough, hombre," the man said. "Say from there what you want."

"This Matt Cameron's ranch?"

"*Si.*"

"Where's Cameron?"

"Gone to Dodge."

"Nobody here but you?"

"That's right," he said. "The others put a herd on the trail to Dodge City. They left a week ago. You can find Señor Cameron up in Kansas, hombre."

IT WAS a pointed hint for me to ride on, but I ignored it. I looked about, certain that he wasn't alone. There had to be the girl and another man. One of the other two soddies was no doubt a bunkhouse, and one the owner's house. Smoke was curling lazily from the chimney on the latter. And I had a glimpse of the girl now. She appeared at the rear of the house that was giving off smoke. She was carrying a basket of wash. She was gone from my sight the next moment. I looked back at the Mexican.

"Who's the lady, amigo?"

"None of your business, hombre. Ride on."

I said, "What is this, a cross-dog outfit?"

He said, "You heard me. Ride on!"

He cocked the shotgun, swung it to his shoulder. There was no arguing with a shotgun, so I said, "All right, all right," and rode on across the yard. When I was a little beyond the buildings, I figured I

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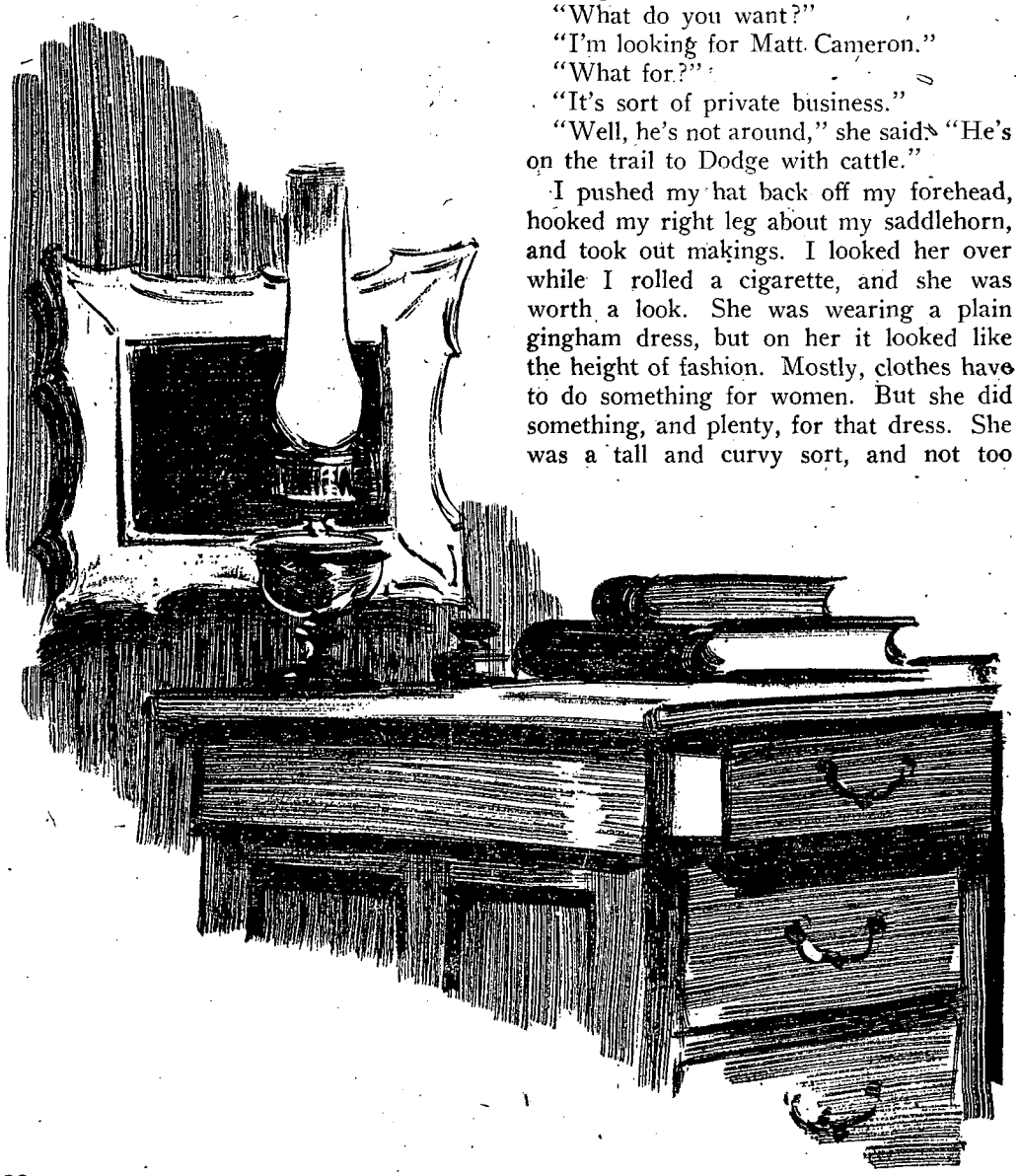
could take a chance, a shotgun's range being so short. I dropped off my pack horse, jabbed spurs to my dun, and wheeled about toward the side of the sod house. The Mexican yelled something in Spanish, but no shot came. I reached the rear of the house, and there she was, hanging wash on a line. She sure believed in cleanliness. She froze in the act of pinning a petticoat to the line, staring at me. The Mexican came over, cursing loudly in Spanish.



I said to her, "Call him off. I don't mean anybody any harm."

She said, "Miguel, quit it."

He stopped short, muttering to himself and eying me with suspicion.

The girl stared at me, her cheeks growing red and then turning pale. There was an agony of embarrassment in her eyes, and it was clear that she had no doubt that I was the man who'd seen her at the creek last night.

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Matt Cameron."

"What for?"

"It's sort of private business."

"Well, he's not around," she said. "He's on the trail to Dodge with cattle."

I pushed my hat back off my forehead, hooked my right leg about my saddlehorn, and took out makings. I looked her over while I rolled a cigarette, and she was worth a look. She was wearing a plain gingham dress, but on her it looked like the height of fashion. Mostly, clothes have to do something for women. But she did something, and plenty, for that dress. She was a tall and curvy sort, and not too

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Janet jerked open a drawer and grabbed a six-shooter

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young, either, but somewhere between twenty and twenty-five. She had brown hair with reddish highlights, and it was a soft, tousled mass. Her features were bold but nicely molded, and her complexion had a healthy glow. I couldn't tell if her eyes were gray or green; they seemed green to me, and there was no doubt about them being angry.

She said, "Is this necessary?"

I lighted my smoke. "What, ma'am?"

"Your looking me over like this."

"Maybe not necessary," I said. "But it's pleasant. I'm sorry I gave you a scare last night, ma'am."

Her cheeks got red again. "If you were a gentleman, you wouldn't have mentioned last night. Listen, mister—"

"Bannister's my name. Jim Bannister."

"I was saying, mister, that you'd better ride on."

"I want to see Matt Cameron. I'll wait here until he gets back."

"You will like—" She choked back the swear word. "I'm Janet Cameron, Matt's daughter. I keep his tally books and write his letters, and I happen to know that he's never done business with anybody named Bannister. Miguel has a shotgun, and I've got a rifle in the house that I can shoot." Her eyes were green, all right; they were bright with anger now.

I took a long drag on my cigarette. My name hadn't upset her that I could see, but that didn't prove it meant nothing to her. She was smart enough, I figured, to cover up. If Tom Duane had come here, he'd certainly told her that he expected a man named Bannister to be on his trail. I suddenly remembered the man who'd come running last night when she cut loose with her rifle at me. It hadn't been Miguel. The voice had been young, with no trace of a Spanish accent. Tom Duane, maybe.

A quiver af alarm crept along my spine as I realized that Duane might be in the house, watching me with a cocked gun in his hand. I suspected that he might be, for the girl had some reason for wanting me to leave. She sure wasn't afraid of me, for herself. On the chance that Duane was there, with a gun lined on my back, I decided that I'd better try to humor her.

I straightened out on my horse, touched my hat to her. Somehow, I couldn't help saying, "I'll be seeing you, Miss Cameron."

THEN I RODE back to where I'd left my pack animal, caught it up, and left the place. I breathed easier when I was out of bullet range, and an hour later, out of sight of the ranch headquarters, I turned west toward the creek. I halted and dismounted in a clump of scrub cottonwoods on the opposite side of the Squaw.

Leaving my horses, I climbed a little rocky knob from where I could see the Cameron place fairly well. I'd hardly begun to watch it when a rider tore away from the buildings and crossed the flat at a hard lope. He was heading north, and his course led him near enough to my position for me to identify him as Miguel. He might have seen me if he'd glanced in that direction, but he kept his eyes straight ahead. And that old *vaquero* could ride a horse.

My first thought was that the girl had sent him to Tom Duane's hideout, to warn the outlaw, and my impulse was to follow him. Then I reasoned that Janet Cameron suspected I might be keeping watch, and she'd sent Miguel out in an attempt to toll me away so that Duane, hiding at the ranch, could escape. My hunch that Duane was at the Cameron place was a strong one. I couldn't ignore it.

I lounged there against a boulder, smoking a cigarette and keeping watch on the distant buildings, and I kept watching all morning. Nobody else rode away from the place, and Miguel didn't return. Toward noon, woodsmoke again curled from the chimney of the girl's house and I supposed she was getting dinner. I wondered if she would bother to cook a meal if she were alone, and decided that she wouldn't. I was even more convinced that Duane was there.

Upon seeing the smoke, I figured that Duane wouldn't be leaving until after he'd eaten his meal, so I left the knob and offsaddled my horses and staked them out. I opened a can of peaches for my dinner, then went back to the knob and squatted by

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the shady side of the big boulder. Smoke was still coming from the chimney yonder, but gradually it thinned to a wispy feather. I figured Duane and the girl were eating now.

I could have made sure he was there by returning to the place, but it seemed a foolhardy thing to try. There was too much flat, open range to cross. I'd be an easy target for Duane, and I didn't doubt for a minute that he'd try to kill me if I crowded him. He had plenty of reason to know that even here in the Neutral Strip I was a threat to him. If he was smart at all, he'd know that here I was more of a danger to him than I'd been in Texas—for here in No Man's Land no holds were barred. The game could be played without regard to any rules such as often tied the hands of a law-abiding citizen in a country like Texas. Here I could play the game as dirty as any lawless hombre.

There was a five-hundred-dollar reward offered for Tom Duane. There was also a like amount offered for each of Duane's three partners. The bounty had been posted by George Faber, president of the bank that was robbed of the thirty thousand dollars. But I didn't care a hang about collecting bounties. I wasn't much interested now, having resigned from the Texas Rangers, in recovering the bank's money or in sending them to prison for the holdup. What I wanted was to get the four of them for killing the sheriff of San Marco.

Sheriff Ben Morgan— He'd not even known there was a bank holdup underway. He'd just happened to step out of the courthouse as the four swung away from in front of the bank. They spotted him, and one—not Tom Duane but one of the others—had reined in and grabbed out his gun and fired three slugs into old Ben Morgan. Yeah, he was sixty-five—but he'd been young in his mind, and a mighty fine man. Besides, he'd been the man who raised me and made me into an image of himself.

I'D BEEN a range orphan when the sheriff caught me breaking into a general store down at Valido. I'd passed up the till, and that had been in my favor—my not having stolen money. But I had stolen a slab of bacon, some coffee, peppermint candy, and a sack of tobacco. I'd been half-starved. The sheriff had made me put the stuff back, and he'd taken me home with him. He'd owned a little ranch outside San Marco, and lived there with his missus. Ma Morgan had been a fine woman, and she was a real mother to me for half a dozen years—and I grieved as much as Ben when she passed away. We'd bached it, after Ma's death, and I grew up almost like a son to him. I'd got old enough to strike out for myself, and I'd worked as a cowhand for some of the big outfits. But I'd wanted to be a lawman like Ben Morgan. There'd been no chance for me to become a sheriff, being so young; and Ben had had only one deputy, Ed Wheeler, who'd married the job. But the Rangers took young buckaroos, if they were right sort, and so I got to be a Ranger.

So it was because of Ben Morgan's murder that I quit the Rangers and came into No Man's Land where a Ranger had no authority to go. I wanted to avenge him. Back in Texas, folks could think what they wished. I hadn't let Tom Duane escape for a cut of the loot.

The afternoon was long, and nothing happened. Miguel still hadn't returned, and I saw nobody else ride away from the ranch headquarters. My hunch that Duane was there was as strong as ever, and I began to wonder about his being at the place with Janet Cameron. It began to look as though there was something between the outlaw and the girl. That seemed possible, for Duane was a handsome sort.

Along about sundown, I saw smoke rise from the chimney again and knew that she was about to get supper. I was hungry, myself, but there was no time for me to build a fire and cook a meal, for it seemed likely that Duane would leave the ranch after nightfall. I smoked a cigarette for my supper, then went to the trees by the creek and saddled my dun. I mounted and rode out at dusk, keeping to the west side of the creek, holding my horses to a walk, and making use of what cover there was to keep from being spotted.

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The creek brought me close to the buildings, and now, as dusk thickened, a lamp burned in the house. In the kitchen, I figured. I dismounted and left my horse in some bushes, then waded the creek and sank to the ground on the opposite side. The rear of the sod house was only a hundred yards away. The kitchen door was closed, and the one window showing lamplight was curtained. I saw the girl's shadow against the curtain several times, but unless I busted into the house there was no way for me to see if Duane was with her.

I waited there for maybe half an hour, then rose and moved silently to the side of the house. I'd hardly reached it when the door opened. The girl came out and I heard her humming the tune of *Cotton-Eye Joe*. She was carrying a wooden bucket, and she went to the creek and filled it. She was still humming when she returned to the house. I waited until I heard the creak of the door hinges, and then I moved fast. She'd just got the door closed when I tried its latch and pushed it open. She whirled, spilling water from her bucket. Her mouth flew open, but she was so startled that no sound came from her throat. I closed the door, stood with my back to it.

She found her voice. "Get out of here, you!"

I'd seen as I shoved the door open that she was alone, but now I looked toward the doorway leading toward the rest of the house. I half expected Duane to come rushing into the kitchen from another room. He didn't. And not only was there no sound from the other part of the house, but I had the feeling that there was nobody in it but the girl and myself.

She said, "Listen, whoever you're looking for isn't here. You're not half so smart as you think." She turned from me, carried her bucket to the cookstove and poured water into the tea kettle. She set the bucket down at the side of the stove, then faced me again. "Go see for yourself, if you don't believe me," she said. "Then clear out. I don't want you around here."

I looked about the kitchen, and except for the outer walls being of sod, it was like a kitchen in any ranch house. The inner walls were of plank, and there was plank flooring. Besides the stove, there was a large table in the center of the room with a bench on either side of it. The table was covered with a red-and-white checked cloth. It had been cleared of dishes, and the dishes were in a pan on a smaller table over beside the stove.

I had an idea that the rest of the house was properly furnished too, and it was evident that Matt Cameron had more than a mere cow camp here. I figured that he'd built so solidly because this was his main ranch. Most cow outfits in the Strip had only temporary camps, and had other ranches back in Texas or over in New Mexico Territory. But apparently the Cameron outfit had accepted the challenge of No Man's Land and put down permanent roots, unbothered by the hostility of the country.

WONDERING if my hunch had had been wrong after all, I asked the girl. "How long ago did he leave?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"You know. Why make me say it?"

"My father left some days ago," she said curtly. "My brothers are with him. Miguel left early this morning."

I watched her closely, and said, "Tom Duane."

She was a good actress. Nothing showed on her face as she said, "I never heard of him. And if you think I've got a man hiding here, you're—insulting!"

"Well, I could be wrong."

"You're plenty wrong, Mr. Bannister!"

"Maybe," I said. "But it occurs to me that your menfolks wouldn't leave you here alone—not in the middle of No Man's Land. Your father left Miguel behind to look out for you, and he wouldn't have ridden out unless he figured that you had some protection. Duane is somewhere around."

"I told you to see for yourself. Search the house, Bannister. Go look in the bunkhouse—and in the barn too. I give you permission."

An idea came to me. I walked over to the

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side table, by which she stood, and looked at the dishpan. It held two of everything: plates, cups, saucers, knives, forks, spoons. I faced her, and she was watching me with an uneasy look in her eyes.

She said, "That means nothing. I didn't wash up my dinner things. I let them go to do them now with my supper things."

I shook my head. "Not you. You're too good a housekeeper."

"Thanks. I'm flattered."

"He ate with you."

"All right—he ate with me. Then he rode out."

I didn't say anything to that. I went to the cupboard and got a cup, then went to the stove and filled it from the coffee pot. I stood there, sipping the coffee. Her eyes hated me. She was a woman of strong feelings. She couldn't just dislike me, she had to hate me. I found myself thinking that if she were in love with Duane, he was a mighty lucky man—on that score, at least. I emptied the cup and put it in the dishpan, then took out makings and built a smoke.

After lighting up, I said, "He didn't escape on his own. I let him."

"That was big-hearted of you!"

"I don't care much about seeing him go to prison—or to the gallows."

"No, you just want the money," she said. "The thirty thousand dollars. A crooked lawman." She was scornful. "That makes you lower than any outlaw."

I thought I heard a sound outside, and was about to turn to the door when she moved toward me. I made the mistake of letting her distract me, for as I looked at her the door slammed open and Duane leapt into the kitchen with a gun in his hand. I dropped my cigarette and grabbed for my own gun. But she was the quicker. My hand closed on nothing, for she had jerked my gun from its holster.

Duane laughed. And his weapon, already cocked, was lined on my chest. I saw his finger begin to squeeze the trigger.

THE GIRL cried, "Tom—don't!" I flung myself sideways, slamming into a bench and the dining table with such force that both went crashing over. Duane's shot roared in the kitchen, and the slug missed me by inches. At the instant he fired the table was falling away from my hurtling body, and the lamp, which had stood atop it, struck the floor with an explosive crash of glass and metal. The flame was extinguished, and the room plunged into sooty darkness. I recovered my balance and dived at Duane, taking him around the knees. He had no chance to fire a second shot, but he clubbed down with the gun and the blow caught me in the back. There was a burst of pain for me, then I heaved him over backwards. He went down hard, and I swarmed over him. I wrenched the gun out of his hand, leapt to my feet, looked for the girl.

I shoved the captured gun into my waistband, and went after her. She'd called to Duane not to shoot me, but that didn't mean that she wouldn't pull the trigger on the gun she'd taken from me. I grabbed at her, and in the darkness I wasn't able to see what I grabbed. I got an armful of girl. She screamed and fought against me, and for a time I had my hands full. I'd never had a woman fight me before, and Janet Cameron's strength surprised me. Then I heard the gun fall to the floor, and I released her and stooped to pick it up. It took me a few seconds to find it, and by the time I came erect Duane was up and moving through the door. He was running toward the creek when I reached the door.

I yelled, "Stop—or by hell I'll drop you!"

He didn't stop, so I fired a shot over his head. It stopped him. He faced about, gasped, "All right, Bannister—you win." He came walking toward me.

Over my shoulder, I said, "You, in there! Make a light."

Janet made some reply to that, and it could have been that she swore at me. After the way she fought me, I was willing to believe she knew how to cuss. She had to get a lamp from another room, but finally the kitchen was lighted again. I told Duane to get inside, then I followed him and closed the door. Janet had placed the lamp on the side table. Her eyes were bright with fury. I gestured with my gun.

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"Pick up that table and bench," I told Duane. "Then sit down."

He did as I ordered, then sat at the table. He looked sullen. He was of medium height, stockily built, blondish, and coarsely handsome. He didn't look like a man who'd go over to the wrong side of the law, but he'd done just that and I had no sympathy for him.

I said, "You busted out of the San Marco jail because I let you, friend. You got out of Texas because I gave you the chance. I could have kept you behind bars, if it had suited my purpose, and I could have tracked you down before you ever reached No Man's Land. But I wanted to see where you'd head."

"Sure," he said savagely. "You thought I had that thirty thousand dollars cached somewhere—and you wanted to get your hands on it!"

"Guess again, Duane."

He sneered, not saying anything.

I said, "Why don't you come to your senses? It was your first misstep. You were a square shooter up until you got in with bad company. You're a young fellow, and you've got a fine girl in love with you. So why not try to square yourself with the law?"

He looked at me, not sneering now. "How?"

"Make a deal with me."

"I've got no money. I told you the truth. I never got a cent of that loot."

"I'm not talking about money," I said. "The sheriff at San Marco was like a father to me, and I want the man who killed him. I know it wasn't you who shot him down, but I don't know which of your partners did the shooting. I don't know any of them, Duane. None of the witnesses to the bank holdup and the murder could identify any of the crowd but you. They were all strangers to San Marco. Now you tell me who those three hombres are and where you're to meet them, and—"

"I'm no squealer, Bannister! I told you that before!"

I ignored that, and went on, "And I'll help you get off with a lighter prison sentence."

"I'm not getting any prison sentence at all, Ranger!"

"You're forgetting that I've got a gun on you, Duane."

"You're forgetting that this is No Man's Land."

"There's nothing to keep me from taking you back to Texas," I said, beginning to lose my temper. "And if you won't go for this deal, I'll take you back if I have to drag you the whole way!"

He didn't answer that, but I could see fear in his eyes.

The girl said, "Why don't you make him a decent offer, Bannister?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like letting him go free altogether."

"That's asking a lot, Miss Cameron."

SHE SHOOK her head. "No, it isn't. Like you said, it was Tom's first misstep. He just got in with bad company. He made a mistake. But if he makes it right—well, you should give him another chance."

I glanced at Duane, then looked at her again. Her eyes didn't hate me now, but pleaded with me. I'd guessed right; she was in love with him. With an outlaw, a bank robber, a man who wasn't half good enough for her. I caught myself up, realizing that I didn't really know what she was like. I was carried away by the beauty of her. A man who'd been around and seen so much of the messy side of life as I had should know better. There'd been a Ranger in Company B who'd often said that you can't tell a book from its cover. That went for women too. I didn't know what kind of a woman Janet Cameron really was.

I said, "If you want a pardon for him, only the governor of Texas can give you that. I'm not even a Ranger now. I can only speak for myself, but I'm willing to let him go free if he helps me get his partners."

Her voice sang, saying, "Tom! Do you hear?"

"I heard what he said," Duane told her. "But how good is his word?"

I said, "You've got plenty to lose by not taking my word. I'm not going to fool

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around with you, Duane. Either you help me, or I'll take you back to Texas and turn you over to the Rangers. And, believe me, they want you bad."

Janet went to him, put a hand on his shoulder. "Take a chance, Tom," she said. "Please, for my sake."

He eyed me narrowly. "If I give you their names and tell you where I was to meet them, you'll let me stay here?"

"Yeah."

"Once I tell you, you could break your word."

"I could, but I won't."

Janet said, "If you'd tell him the whole story, Tom, I'm sure he wouldn't hold what you've done against you. Tell him about it, and then maybe you'll feel that he'll keep his word because he'll understand how it was with you."

He turned sullen again. "A lot he'd care!"

"Then I'll tell him."

"Suit yourself," Duane said, and took out makings to roll a cigarette.

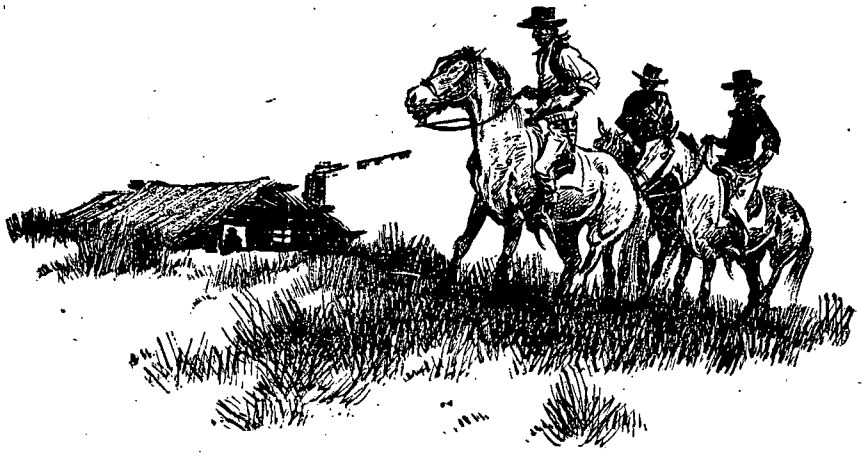
Janet stood by him, her hand still on his shoulder, but she looked at me. "Tom inherited a little ranch from his father, Bannister," she said. "A little ranch with a big mortgage. The bank at San Marco held the mortgage. Tom missed an interest payment, and—"

"Tell the whole of it," Duane cut in. "I couldn't make the interest payment because I gambled away the money I got for the sale of some cattle."

She said, "And the bank foreclosed—took over the ranch."

"So he got sore and decided to rob the bank. That's not much of a story," I commented.

"That's only a part of it," she said. "Tom sold the cattle down at Valido. The price was low to begin with. The market was flooded with cattle just at that time, but he couldn't hold off because he needed that interest money. The market was flooded and the price low because the big Crown Cattle Company was selling at the same time. Crown pushed nearly ten thousand head onto the cattle buyers. It was a deliberate attempt to keep Tom from finding a buyer. But he found one anyway. Afterwards, he did what men always do after swinging a deal—" She sounded a little peeved about this. "He celebrated. He drank too much that night, and he got talked into a poker game. The game was rigged. The Crown foreman had fixed it with the other players to take Tom."



The three hardcases surrounded Janet's cabin

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"The Crown foreman, Jess Hanlon, bragged about it afterwards."

"Go on. What's the rest of it?"

"The Crown outfit had been trying to buy Tom out, had tried to buy out his father before him," Janet said. "Crown wanted that little spread badly. Crown's

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range is big, but it hasn't much water. There was a good water supply on Tom's ranch. Crown wanted the Duane ranch—and Crown got it."

"From the bank?"

"George Faber owns the bank, and he's also a big stockholder in the Crown Cattle Company," Janet said. "Faber knew that Tom was short of cash and would have to sell cattle to make his interest payment, and he tipped off Jess Hanlon, the Crown foreman. Hanlon saw to it that Tom was robbed of his money from the sale of the cattle. So he blamed Faber. He brooded, and he got to hate the man. Then he got acquainted with the wrong sort of men and—well, they robbed Faber's bank. It was foolish, of course, but it wasn't much worse than what was done to him."

"Maybe it wouldn't have been," I said, "but for the murder of Sheriff Morgan."

"I'm sorry about that," Janet said. "But Tom didn't kill him."

I didn't say anything to that. I holstered my gun, took out makings and rolled a smoke.

She said, "I'm as honest as anybody. I believe in law and order as much as you do, Bannister. But I can't blame Tom for what he did. He was robbed of his ranch, and he wasn't the first man to be robbed of a ranch by George Faber and the Crown bunch. My father owned a ranch down near San Marco some years ago. Crown wanted it too, and with Faber's help, Crown got it. That's why we Camerons are here in No Man's Land. You can believe that or not, Bannister!"

"I believe it," I said, lighting up.

I DID. I'd been away from the San Marco country for nearly ten years, but I used to go back occasionally to visit Ben Morgan, and he told me about what was happening in the town and on the surrounding range. I remembered his telling me about Matt Cameron losing his ranch to the Crown Cattle Company.

It had been about six years ago, when Crown first came into the country and began buying up range. The Bank of San Marco, at that time, had been owned by a man named Hackett, with George Faber merely an employee. Hackett had been speculating and lost a lot of the bank's money; finally he'd absconded with what funds remained, and the bank failed. Matt Cameron had been a big depositor, and the bank failure had ruined him. He'd lost his ranch to Crown. Later, George Faber, with help from the big Crown Cattle Company, had reorganized the bank.

I recalled now that Sheriff Ben Morgan had been suspicious of Faber at the time. Eli Hackett had been old and sickly, and Ben Morgan had been sure that the banker did make a lot of bad investments but he'd never believed that Hackett absconded with any of the bank's money. The sheriff had located him some months later, through the Pinkerton Agency, back East somewhere. But when Ben got there, Hackett had passed away—and in his hotel room there'd been only the banker's few clothes and less than ten dollars.

Ben had suspected that George Faber helped himself to what remained of the bank's money, for as he'd said to me where else could Faber have got the funds to reorganize the bank? He'd reasoned that the Crown Cattle Company hadn't done all the financing for Faber. But suspicion hadn't been enough, and Sheriff Morgan had never been able to pin anything on the man. I eyed Janet Cameron curiously.

"Does your father blame George Faber for the loss of his San Marco ranch?"

"Yes. He blamed Faber as much as he blamed old Eli Hackett," Janet said. "He always said that the two of them looted the bank, only Faber was clever enough to cover up his crookedness. Now that you know what George Faber and his Bank of San Marco are like, you should understand why Tom took part in that holdup."

"All right," I said. "I'm no longer a Ranger, and I'm not obligated to arrest him. I've offered him a deal, and I'll keep my end of the bargain."

She nodded, then looked at Duane. "Tell him, Tom," she urged.

He'd had time enough to think it over, and now he said, "The other three were from New Mexico. I got to know one of

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them, Ed Shard, down at Valido after I'd lost my cattle money. He'd heard Crown's ranch boss, Hanlon, bragging about how I'd been taken. Ed bought me a few drinks, and I guess I got drunk. Anyway, I talked about getting even with George Faber and Jess Hanlon. He asked me a lot of questions about the bank—how many people worked there, where it was located in San Marco, if the sheriff's office was near it. I didn't know what he was getting at, but later, after the bank foreclosed on my ranch and sold it to Crown, Ed looked me up and took me to meet the other two. They had a camp in the Morada Hills. They asked me then about robbing the bank."

"Why'd they want you in on it?"

"They figured they'd have more chance of pulling it off and making a getaway if they had somebody that knew the town helping them," Duane said. "They said I could go in first and see if things looked right for a stickup, and then signal them. That's how we worked it."

I'd never heard of Ed Shard before, so I asked, "What kind of a man is Shard?"

"Smart and tough."

"Who are his partners?"

"One's named Jake Durango and the other Mel Tolbert."

I nodded, for I knew about Mel Tolbert. A real bad hombre, he was wanted by the Texas Rangers on a number of charges—rustling, horse-stealing, armed robbery, and murder. I didn't know anything about Durango, but to be partners with Mel Tolbert he and Ed Shard had to be genuine hardcases. Tom Duane had gotten in with bad company, all right.

I said, "Which one of them killed Sheriff Morgan?"

Duane didn't hesitate about answering that. "Mel Tolbert," he said.

"Where were you to meet afterwards?"

"We were planning to head straight for New Mexico. We had a change of horses waiting at our camp in the Moradas, about thirty miles from San Marco. We figured on riding as hard as we could to the camp, shift our saddles, then ride on. The fresh horses would have let us outrun anybody that followed us.

"The trouble was, we never did make a real getaway. I didn't, anyway. There were a bunch of Crown cowhands in town that afternoon, and they heard the shooting when Tolbert killed the sheriff. They were on their broncs and chasing us before we cleared town. They were so close behind us that when we got to the hills, we wouldn't take the time to change horses. Tolbert said that we'd split up, every man for himself. That's what we did, and I got caught."

"What part of New Mexico were you heading for, Duane?"

"The Black Range. Ed Shard said he has a little ranch there."

"How come you didn't head for New Mexico when you escaped from jail?"

Duane shrugged. "I was sick of it," he said. "All I could think was that I had to get out of Texas. I figured that the lawmen in New Mexico would be told to watch for me and arrest me. Mexico—Well, I didn't want to go there. So I headed for here." He gave me an ugly look. "I didn't count on you coming into the Strip."

"You've given up all idea of sharing in the loot?"

"Well—" He hesitated a moment. "Sure. How could I get any of it now, with you going after the others?"

AS I TOOK a long drag on my cigarette, suddenly I felt a little leery of him. Up until now, I'd figured him for an all right sort who'd made this one mistake only because he'd gotten in with real outlaws. I'd been sure that he would try to kill me, but only to keep from being taken back to Texas—and prison. I'd sized him up as just another cowboy turned bad, and, like so many of them, he could be straightened out if tripped up by the law in time. Wild but not vicious; that's how I'd pegged him.

But at the moment I felt a strong distrust of him, and tried, without success, to find a reason for it. I'd made a deal with him, however, and now it was up to me to live up to my end of the bargain.

I took his gun from my waistband, wondering if he'd use it to shoot me in the back if I left it with him. My distrust of him

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said that there was a chance that he might, so I broke the gun, used the ejector, punched the cartridge from the cylinder into my hand. I held the gun out to the girl.

"I'll be leaving now," I said. "I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you."

She said, "It's all right," and took the gun. "You've been decent enough."

"Keep him straight, eh?"

"I will, Bannister."

That brought the sneer back to Duane's face, but he didn't say anything.

I turned to the door, went out, and was halfway to the creek when she called after me. I faced about and watched her come toward me. She still held the gun. I wondered if she'd been afraid to give it to Duane, afraid that he would reload it and try to shoot me in the back. Her face was grave.

"I want to say thanks, Bannister."

"No need to," I told her. "I got what I wanted."

"I should apologize too—for the way I treated you, for lying to you."

"He's your man. You've a right to lie for him."

"You would have done differently if it hadn't been for me, wouldn't you?"

I thought about that for a moment. Then I said, "Yeah. I would have forced the truth out of him, somehow, and then taken him back to Texas. He has you to thank for getting out of it so easy."

She looked at me in a different way, as though she saw me for the first time as a man instead of a manhunter. But she didn't say more.

I said, "Goodnight, Miss Cameron," and turned away.

I crossed the creek, mounted my horse, and rode away. But I didn't ride away from Janet Cameron. She went with me in my thoughts. That was another thing that never before had happened to me, my carrying the memory of a girl about with me. . . .

Back where I'd left my spare horse and campgear, I off-saddled the dun and put it on a picket rope. Then I built a fire and rustled up a meal. I ate my supper and sat by the dying fire, thinking it over. I'd head for New Mexico in the morning, of course, and once there try to find Ed Shard's ranch in the Black Range. I knew that country pretty well; I'd been over to the Territory on Ranger business several times. The Black Range was wild country. A lot of Texas cowmen had founded ranches there, and quite a few rustlers and other outlaws had found it a more healthful climate than Texas. It was the sort of country to attract men like Ed Shard and his partners.

But I had an odd feeling about going to New Mexico. I didn't want to make the trip. I was uneasy about it, all of a sudden. I tried to figure out the reason for feeling like that, and told myself that the odds of three to one might scare anybody. But I didn't convince myself of that. I was resolved to avenge Sheriff Ben Morgan, and nothing could make me back down. As for the odds, I didn't need to rush in and take on the three of them at once. I could bide my time, take them one at a time. The three wouldn't stay together night and day forever, and sooner or later I could catch one alone and then another. No, it wasn't fear that made me uneasy about the trip.

It was my distrust of Tom Duane.

I got to thinking that maybe he'd lied to me about where to find them, and the more I thought it the more I felt that I shouldn't head for New Mexico. I'd taken it for granted that he wanted nothing more than to be out of the mess and stay out of prison, but I could have been wrong. He still might have some idea of getting his share of the loot, and if he did, it was natural that he should want me out of the way. And to send me on a wild goose chase into the Territory was an easy way to get rid of me. If I was right in my suspicions of him, it followed that he would meet his three partners here in the Neutral Strip—somewhere within easy riding distance of the Cameron ranch.

Another thought came, and jolted me.

I thought that maybe he had already met them and got his share of the loot!

THE IDEA hadn't occurred to me before, but now I couldn't get rid of it. It was possible that he'd outsmarted me; if he had, he sure must be laughing at

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me now. When I fixed it so that he could escape from the San Marco jail, I hadn't followed him by keeping him in sight. If he'd spotted me following him, he would have guessed what I was up to and my scheme wouldn't have worked at all.

He'd escaped from jail in the middle of the night, stolen a horse at O'Dade's livery stable, and headed out the south road. I'd picked up his trail in Valido the next day. He'd swapped horses there, without anybody's permission, and I'd found the second mount abandoned about ten miles east of Valido along the railroad tracks at a water tank. He'd hopped an eastbound freight, I learned that later, by going back to Valido and talking with the station master there. The only trains that took on water at the tank were freights, and the only freight that he could have hopped at that time was an eastbound.

I hadn't picked up his trail again for a week, then it was at Rawles Junction. He'd been thrown off the train there by the brakeman. He'd given the station master a hard luck story, and the station master had staked him to a meal. Leaving the restaurant, Duane had stolen a rancher's horse outside the general store. The rancher had grabbed somebody else's horse and gone after him, but Duane, heading north, got away.

So I'd trailed him north through the Panhandle to No Man's Land, but he'd been nearly a week ahead of me. He'd had time enough to meet his outlaw partners and collect his share of the loot, and then go to the Cameron ranch.

I was mixed up now, and didn't know what my next move should be.

A trip to New Mexico might be a fool's errand, but on the other hand I had no evidence that Duane had lied to me. The only way I could find out whether he had lied or not was to make the trip. If I couldn't find any trace of the three outlaws there, I'd know he'd outwitted me. And while I was off to the Territory, if he had lied, Duane could head for parts unknown—and I might never find him again. On the other hand, there was the girl, and it wasn't likely that he would stay away from her for long. I would always be able to locate him through her, somehow, unless she went away with him. That was a thought I didn't like, Janet's going off with him.

I turned in finally, telling myself I hadn't any choice. I would have to go to New Mexico. If I didn't find my men there, I could return to No Man's Land and look for them in that direction. At least I was a little closer to them than I'd been before I caught up with Tom Duane.

Now I knew their names.

I WAS IN the saddle at sunup, leading my pack horse and heading west. It was empty country, beyond the Squaw. I saw a few cattle and got close enough to several to see their brands. They were in the MC iron—Matt Cameron's, I figured. I rode flat prairie all that morning, and at midday I turned southwest in the hope of reaching Beaver Creek before nightfall. By then my horses would need water. I reached the Beaver toward sundown, at a spot where there were a couple homesteads. The settlers had put up the usual sod buildings. They'd plowed the prairie, a wide stretch of it, and put in some kind of crops. I steered clear of their places and stopped about a mile upstream.

I halted only long enough to water my horses and smoke a cigarette, then rode west along the creek with an idea of keeping on the move until it was nearly dark. I'd traveled only about a mile when, topping a rise, I happened to look back and saw that there was a rider on my trail.

I stopped there, watched him. He was still about half a mile away, but coming along at a fast walk. When he sighted me atop the rise, a little later, he waved to me and came on at a lope. It was the hardcase I'd encountered at the Texas line, Will Hanks. He came up to me and reined in, a lopsided grin on his bristly face.

"I was beginning to figure I'd have to track you all the way to the Territory, Ranger," he said. He paused to get rid of some tobacco juice. "Got news for you."

"About Duane?"

"Not exactly."

"What, then?"

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He gave me a shrewd look. "This ought to be worth something to you, Bannister. It's important, else I wouldn't have bothered to come after you. Been riding most of last night and all today. I'd hoped to catch you at the Cameron place, but the girl there said that you'd headed for New Mexico." He squinted at me, his head to one side. "You want to buy what I know?"

"Look, friend, I didn't make a fortune in the Rangers. Where would I get the money to buy information?"

"Well, that's so," he said. "But you can cut me in on what rewards besides the one on Duane you collect. On the other three San Marco bank robbers, I mean."

I stared. "What?"

"Yeah."

"Talk up, man!"

"Are you cutting me in, fifty-fifty?"

I said, "Look, I'll be honest with you." I dug into my pocket. I had a small roll of bills, savings from my Ranger pay over the years. I counted off two hundred and fifty dollars, and there wasn't much left in my roll after I handed the two-fifty to Hanks. "See? I'm playing square with you. That's half the reward for Duane. I found him after I talked with you, and I'm not taking him in. But you've got half of what the reward would be if I took him in. All right?"

A grin was stretched wide across his hungry face. "More than all right," he said. "But I don't figure it."

"I'm paying you half the reward on Duane even though I'm not going to collect it, because that was my deal with you," I told him. "And so you take my word for it that if I do collect on the other three I'll split it with you."

"Your word is as good as your money, Bannister."

"Good. Now what about the other three?"

"After I left you, I headed toward Sod Town," he said. "It's an outlaw hangout. There's more tough-hands in Sod Town than any town in Texas ever saw at once. I figured that maybe Duane would have put up there—or somebody there would have heard of him. I never did get that far. I met up with a hombre who'd just come from Sod Town, a friend of mine named Russ Meecham. He was camped on the Palo Duro, and he had a jug of rotgut. Well, we drank and talked—"

"Skip the details, Hanks."

"Sure. He said it was funny, my asking if he'd seen or heard of a hombre named Duane in Sod Town."

"Why funny?"

"Because three other hombres were looking for this same Duane."

"In Sod Town?"

"Yeah."

"Did Meecham find out their names?"

"In Sod Town," Hanks said, "a man never asks strangers their names, Bannister. But I'd bet plenty that those three are Duane's partners. Why else would they be looking for him?"

NO ANSWER came to me right off, but I thought about it. Tom Duane had pulled off only one job, and participation in a single bank robbery didn't make him one of Texas's most notorious outlaws. But the side issues of that holdup served to make him one of the most badly wanted. In the first place, a lawman had been killed immediately after the holdup, and Texas Rangers took special pains to apprehend the murderer of a lawman in the Lone Star State. Duane hadn't fired the shots that killed Sheriff Ben Morgan, but that would make little difference to the Rangers. They would want every member of the band.

Second, Duane had been permitted to escape because of—to put it kindly—the negligence of a Ranger, meaning me, and that was a blot on the organization's record. I decided that they might want Duane badly enough to send some officers into the Neutral Strip after him, even though it was outside their bailiwick. If that was the case, they wouldn't wear their badges. More likely, they would pretend to be men on the dodge from the law to avoid being spotted as lawmen.

There was another possibility. That five-hundred-dollar reward offered for Duane might have tempted some San Marco men

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into doing some bounty hunting. In the cattle country five hundred dollars was a lot of money—especially to cowhands—and I could imagine that some might have nerve enough to venture into No Man's Land to look for Duane.

No, the three men Will Hanks had heard about from Russ Meecham didn't necessarily mean they were Duane's outlaw friends. But that wasn't something I was going to mention to Hanks. If he wasn't on the wrong side of the law himself, he had plenty of friends who were, and he might tell it around if I said that those three might be Rangers with hidden badges or bounty hunters without badges. He'd kept quiet about me only because I was worth money to him.

I said, "Meecham didn't tell you what they looked like?"

"He said they looked like the kind he wouldn't want trouble with."

"That description could fit most any three men."

"It could," said Hanks. "But I'm betting they're Duane's partners." He leaned forward in his saddle, his manner eager and a greedy look in his eyes. "What are you going to do about them, Bannister?"

"Have a look at them, anyway."

"You going right into Sod Town?"

"Why not?" I said. "But right now, I'm making camp and rustling up some grub."

I turned down from the rise, toward the creek. Hanks followed. I off-saddled my horses, staked them out. He did the same with his roan. He wasn't any help with building a fire or cooking the meal, but he sure ate his share of the grub. Afterwards, I put more brush on the fire and sat by it with a cigarette. Hanks took a fresh chew of tobacco. I smoked and thought. He chewed and spat, and I soon found out that he was doing some thinking of his own.

For he said, "There's two reasons why those other three bank robbers would be hunting Duane. You agree, Bannister?"

"You're doing the talking."

He chuckled. "I am, ain't I? Well, one reason could be that they want to give him his share of the loot. But the other is more likely."

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I frowned. "Well, get it said."

His sly eyes gleamed at me. "It could be that they want to collect their share from him," he said.

THAT JOLTED ME. Maybe because, even though I distrusted Tom Duane, I still wanted to think he wasn't entirely a wrong one. Anyway, I hadn't figured it out like Will Hanks had done. He possessed a trickier mind than I did, maybe. Or perhaps he saw things differently because, unlike myself, he didn't think the three men hunting Duane were anyone but Duane's bank-robber partners. I stared at him, beginning to suspect he was right.

He said, "Look, friend; no outlaws are going to put themselves out to find one of their band to give him his cut. It's got to be the other way around. They want to find him to get their cut. Right?"

I was half-convinced, but argued against it. "Duane wasn't really one of them," I said. "He was just an amateur. They

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wouldn't have let him carry the loot when they separated after the robbery."

"He could have got hold of it somehow."

"He didn't have the money when he was caught."

"He could have stashed it away before he got caught."

I didn't say anything to that.

He said, "Why else would they be hunting him? If he hadn't got his share, they would let him look for them. You saw him, you said. Did he give you the idea that he was looking for them, Bannister?"

"Maybe you're right," I said. "He claimed they were planning to go to a ranch one of them owns in New Mexico. They headed in that direction after the robbery, so that must have been where they figured on hiding out. If the others had gotten away with the money, it's not likely that they would have come into No Man's Land looking for him. Either Duane told them that he would head for the Strip when they were forced to split up, or they trailed him here like I did."

Hanks gave me another sly look. "He's hiding at the Cameron ranch, ain't he?"

"That's where I found him. But he could have left after I saw him."

"The chances are he didn't, if Matt Cameron's daughter is his girl—unless she went off with him since I saw her this morning."

"Hanks, do you figure Duane set out to doublecross the others?"

"What else? If he hadn't figured on keeping the whole thirty thousand for himself he would have headed for New Mexico to divvy it up with them, instead of coming into No Man's Land." He chuckled again in his humorless way. "That's really something. A punk crook doublecrossing three tough outlaws. You know what will happen when they catch up with him?"

I nodded. "They'll kill him."

"Yeah. What are you going to do about it?"

I threw my cigarette into the fire. "I'm going to be on hand when and if those three trace him to the Cameron ranch," I said, rising. "There's one of them I want to catch in my gun sights."

I went to saddle my horses. . . .

Hanks came with me, and we kept on the move all night except for a short stop at midnight to rest the horses. We alternated the pace between an easy lope and a fast walk, and so traveled a lot faster than I had on my way west. It was gray dawn when we reached Squaw Creek, at a spot about a half mile upstream from the Cameron place. Once we'd forded the creek, Hanks said, "I'll ride on toward Sod Town. If I catch sight of three strangers headed this way, I'll hightail it back here and tell you. That way they won't catch you off guard."

He headed across the grass flat north of the ranch buildings before I could say anything, and I wondered about that as I followed the creek downstream. He'd seemed in a mighty big hurry to leave me. Maybe he did want to help me, as he'd said, but it would have been more like him to go to the ranch in the hope of getting a hand-out meal; it was close to breakfast and he wasn't packing along any grub that I knew of. But I didn't wonder about him for long, because I was just as uneasy now about approaching the buildings as I'd been the other night. Duane had tried to kill me once, and given the chance he'd try again.

BUT NO GUN opened up at me, and I began to fear that Duane had left the place—and Janet with him. The thought really scared me, but I told myself that it was crazy. She couldn't mean a thing to me, no matter if I had fallen for her—which I had. I'd fallen hard for Janet Cameron, and I was afraid Tom Duane was so important to her that she had gone away with him.

What made me think the two of them had left the ranch was that there was no smoke coming from the chimney of the house and nobody appeared at the door as I rode past and then halted about a hundred yards farther along the creek. I off-saddled my horses, watered them, then staked them out on a patch of grass. The house still looked deserted, but it was still early.

I rolled and lighted a cigarette, then remembered that Duane hadn't been in the house when I forced my way in there on

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my last visit. I figured that maybe he didn't spend the nights there and, if he hadn't pulled out, I might catch him alone. I had an idea that if I caught him away from Janet I might find it easier to make him talk, and maybe get some truth out of him. So I took a long drag on my cigarette, then crushed it under my boot heel and headed for the bunkhouse.

I Injunned up to the sod building, eased the door open, and moved in fast. But nobody was asleep in any of the bunks. I backed out, closed the door, moved toward the barn. I was halfway to it when I got caught.

Janet's voice said, "All right, Bannister! That's far enough!"

I swung about, and she was at the front door of her house—with her rifle aimed at me.

Even at that distance I could see the fury in her eyes, and the tight, determined look about her mouth. She'd gone back to hating me, and that hurt. I said, "Now, look—" and started toward her. She swung the rifle up and squeezed the trigger and the slug kicked up dust right ahead of me. No sooner had she fired than she jacked another cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber and raised the rifle to her shoulder again. This time she beaded me.

"That was a warning shot, Bannister," she said. "The next one won't be."

"Let me talk from here, then, honey."

That "honey" just slipped out, and it surprised me as much as it did her. Her reaction was to lower the rifle slightly, mine to call myself a fool. But it turned out to be a profitable mistake, for Janet regarded me now with a sort of wary speculation. And when I took another step toward her, she didn't shoot.

I said, "Sure, I know what you're thinking—that I've broken my word."

"And you haven't?"

"Not exactly."

"You came back," she said bitterly. "And don't try to tell me that it was because of me. You're not fooling me for a second. You went off and thought it over and changed your mind. Now you think you'll take Tom back to Texas." She shook her head. "You won't, Bannister. Not as long as I'm able to pull the trigger of this rifle!"

Her hair had a coppery sheen in the early sunlight, and even angry she was beautiful. I noticed suddenly that she was dressed differently. She was rigged out for riding. She wore a divided riding skirt of dark green corduroy, half-boots, a mannish gray shirt. There was a wide belt with a big silver buckle cinched tight about her middle, and a bright green neckerchief knotted at her throat. As I looked her over my pulse began to race and I felt my blood sort of surging in my veins. Then it hit me: She was planning to go off with him, with that no-good Tom Duane.

I said, "Where is he?" My voice sounded savage even to me.

"Never mind," she said. "You—"

"I'm not letting you mess up your life for him!"

She stared, wide-eyed. "What are you talking about, Bannister?"

"You, damn it! I'm not letting you go off with him."

"So that's what you're thinking! What business is it of yours?"

I'd never been much of a hand with the ladies, but maybe that was because I'd never before met up with one that drove me out of my senses. Anyway, I didn't know exactly how to handle them and so I just blurted it out to this one, this Janet Cameron. I said, "I'll tell you what business it is of mine. You've got me crazy in love with you, and that makes you my business! But there's something I don't like about you, and that's your being mixed up with Tom Duane."

I'VE KNOWN HIM a long time," she said, and now she held the rifle at her side. "I knew him when we lived down in Texas. I've only known you a couple of days, Bannister, and I don't think I like anything about you. I told you how Tom happened to make his one mistake, and that I don't blame him for it. But I sure hold it against you for being a manhunter and not being able to understand that one mistake doesn't make a man a hopeless

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criminal. You didn't come back just to tell me you're crazy in love with me. You came back to—"

I took another step toward her, and she didn't threaten me with the rifle. I said, "I won't lie to you, honey. I came back because of him. And I'm glad I got here before you went off with him."

She was scornful. "So you could save me from the terrible fate of going away with an outlaw?"

"I thought he wasn't too bad," I told her. "But that was yesterday. Since then I found out something. Now I know he's as bad as they come."

She was still scornful, but curious too. "What did you find out?"

I took out makings. As I spilled tobacco from the sack into the paper, I edged closer. By the time my cigarette was rolled, I was only about ten feet from her. I was closer still when I got it lighted. I took a long drag on it, thoughtfully. She was going to hate me plenty for my suspicions of Tom Duane, but I was going to tell her anyway. I decided to tell her in plain words in the hope of shocking her into her senses where he was concerned.

I said, "He lied to us both."

She didn't say anything.

"He got the money, the whole thirty thousand dollars."

"Like I said before," she said, "you're crazy, Bannister."

"His three partners are in No Man's Land, looking for him," I went on. "He doublecrossed them, cheated them out of their share of the loot. They'll kill him when they catch up with him."

She turned a little pale, but said, "It's not true. You're making this up. I don't know what you thought it would get you, but I can tell you it won't get you a thing." The rifle came up, bored at my middle. "Unbuckle your gun-rig and let it fall to the ground, Bannister. I'm not going to let you be armed when Tom gets here. Hurry up. Do as I say!"

"You're not going to shoot me, honey."

"Don't fool yourself, Bannister!"

"You couldn't. Not with me being in love with you like I am."

She said coldly, "Your saying that doesn't make me feel a thing. I'm in love with Tom Duane, and I have been since I was sixteen. When he gets back, we're going to Kansas to get married, and after that we're going some place where no Texas lawman will ever find us." The rifle was steady and her finger was against the trigger. "I grew up without a mother or any womenfolk, Bannister. I was raised by my father and my three brothers, all real tough rannihans. I think like a man in a lot of ways. So don't think I'm scared to pull this trigger. Now get rid of your gun!"

I said, "All right, you win."

I threw my cigarette away, then unbuckled my gun-rig and let it drop. Then, as she relaxed a little, I dived at her.

The rifle went off as I got a hold on the barrel and turned it from me. The shot missed by inches, but I felt the heat of the powder flash. I wrenched the weapon out of Janet's hands, and then she uttered an incoherent cry and turned into the house in sudden flight.

I threw the rifle aside and went after her, across a comfortably furnished parlor to a desk at its far end. She jerked open a drawer and grabbed out a six-shooter. I had to strike her across the wrist with the edge of my hand in a nasty chopping blow. She shrieked with pain, dropped the revolver. I stooped to pick it up and she caught me with both hands at the shoulders and shoved hard. I fell onto my side, rolled over, scrambled up just in time to keep her from getting the gun. I caught her about the waist, and it was like taking hold of a cougar. She fought me as she had the other night, with wild fury. I picked her up, carried her squirming fiercely to a sofa, dumped her onto it. When she tried to get off it, I pinned her down by the shoulders.

What happened after that happened more by accident than by design.

I bent over and kissed her.

MY LIPS touching her mouth did what force couldn't have done. It took the fight out of her, and more. She became tense at first, and then I felt her go limp. It was a long, long kiss. Her

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hands came up and touched my face. She was responding then, making it last longer still. When it ended, we were both gasping.

She put her hands against my chest and gently pushed me away, then got from the sofa and walked to the desk and stood with her back to me. It was a long time before she spoke, then her voice was small and bleak.

"I'm not like that, Bannister."

"I know you're not, Janet."

"I'm in love with Tom."

"I don't think you are. You're mistaken."

"I'm going to marry him."

I shook my head, denying that, even though she wasn't looking at me. I said, "That would be a bigger mistake."

She sounded close to tears. "I feel like a hussy, like a cheap woman."

"The fault was mine. Don't blame yourself."

She whirled, angry. But not angry with me. "I can't blame you for how I felt, for how I still feel. What kind of a woman am I, to be in love with one man and to like being made love to by another? I feel so ashamed!" She gave me a pleading look. "Why don't you let me alone?"

"Janet, this is a matter of robbery and murder and doublecrossing. Where is Tom Duane?"

"Away. He'll be back today some time."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know," she said bleakly. "He said that there was someone he had to see before we could go to Kansas. Someone in Texas."

"In Texas? Doesn't he realize the danger?"

"He was sure that he wouldn't run into any lawmen."

I walked to the open door. I had a pretty good idea why he'd gone to Texas. When I faced about, Janet was watching me with troubled eyes. "There must be some good in him, or you wouldn't want to marry him," I said. "So I'll help him—if you still want to go off with him when he gets back. He'll need help, Janet. He's in bad trouble. His partners are hunting him, and they'll keep on hunting until they find him no matter where he goes—unless I can catch up with them first and stop them. But right now I want you to help me and work this out with me."

"What do you want me to do, Jim?"

"When he showed up here, did he have anything he tried to hide from you?" I said. "The money stolen from the bank was in gold and silver specie, and so it would be bulky and heavy. I doubt if he could have carried it on his person. Did he—"

She interrupted me. "You're wrong. He had no money."

"Maybe the money was in the saddlebags on his horse?"

"There were no saddlebags."

"A bedroll?"

"No. He had nothing. He was hungry and tired—done-in."

"Then that's where he's gone," I said. "After the money. He hid it somewhere between the time he separated from the others and the time he was caught by those cowhands. He'll have the money with him when he gets back, Janet. He's gone for it now."

She didn't say anything.

I said, "It's up to you. If he's got the money, you'll know he doesn't want to make right his mistake. You'll know that he not only wants to be a thief but a doublecrosser as well. He gave me the names of the others and told me about one owning a ranch in the Black Range only because he was anxious to get rid of me and to convince you that he's not all bad."

Janet shook her head. "He won't have that money, Jim," she said. Then, getting a grip on herself: "I've got to believe in him. I've just got to." She turned toward the kitchen, then looked at me from the doorway. "I haven't eaten breakfast yet. How about you?"

"No."

"You're invited."

"Thanks."

Janet said, "For you're probably determined to stay, anyway." She was her normal self again.

But I was not. I was just a poor fool hopelessly in love.

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IT WAS a long day, with the two of us just waiting. I passed some of the morning by going down the creek and taking a bath and shaving, and later, back at the buildings, by cleaning my six-shooter and rifle. I worked on my guns over in the shade by the bunkhouse. Janet was in and out of the house, looking for Duane. And by noon, with no sign of him, she began to look worried.

She made dinner and invited me to share it, but when we sat down at the table neither of us ate much. Her worry about Duane had robbed her of her appetite, and I was in such low spirits because I was in love with her and she with him that I didn't feel like eating. I smoked while she cleared the table, then, when she began to wash the dishes, I got up and said, "I'll wipe them for you."

She gave me a surprised look, and for a moment looked amused.

She gave me a cloth, and I dried the dishes after she'd washed them.

I got to thinking, for the first time in my life, about having a home of my own—with Janet in it, of course. But there wasn't a chance that I could make that dream come true even if she loved me instead of Duane. I had no home, no job, no prospects. I'd never given any thought to the future. When I resigned from the Rangers I'd looked no farther ahead than to avenging Sheriff Ben Morgan's death. Now I realized that the time would come when I would have to do some planning.

I wouldn't go back into the Rangers. I couldn't if I wanted to; I couldn't wipe out that black mark on my record unless I took Tom Duane back to the San Marco jail—and because of Janet I wouldn't do that. I would have to find a job, and all I knew, outside of being a peace officer, was working as a cowhand. And there wasn't much future to being a cowhand.

We got the dishes done, and Janet said that she'd finish up with the pots and pans. I went over to the door, lounged there looking out toward the creek. Then I remembered something. There was Ben's little ranch down in the San Marco country. It wasn't much of a ranch, with graze enough for only a couple hundred head of cattle and a dozen horses, but his buildings were good ones and what little livestock there was would give a man a start. I knew that Ben had had a will, and that I was his sole heir. I would have rather had him alive than to come into his property, but remembering how close we'd been, I didn't feel as though I was betraying his memory when I told myself I would be glad to have the ranch. I needed something like that, a place of my own to put down roots and keep me busy.

"Jim—"

I looked at Janet. "Yes? What's bothering you?"

"Do you think that—that something's happened to Tom?"

I'd been wondering about that, myself. "Give him a little more time," I told her. "If he went where I think he went, it's a long ride. I don't see how he expected to be back before tonight, unless he figured on his running his horse till it was done-in and then somehow getting a fresh one, and keeping on going like that. I don't think he got caught by any lawmen. The Texas Panhandle is mighty big and empty, and you could go for days without seeing a law badge. Of course, he may have run into somebody who recognized him as a wanted man—somebody who wanted to collect the reward on him." I shook my head. "If only he had given up wanting that money. He could have been safe and free."

Janet didn't say anything to that. But I knew she still wouldn't believe that Duane had gone after that thirty thousand dollars.

The afternoon dragged by, and toward sundown I saddled my dun and rode a couple of miles to a prairie rise and looked south. I saw no Tom Duane coming from the direction of Texas. I didn't see any riders in any direction, and I began to think that maybe he had got caught, or had lied to Janet. I wouldn't have put it past him; he could have figured he was fairly safe after sending me off to New Mexico after his partners, and so planned to get the loot and strike out for some far away place—without her.

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JANET had supper on the table when I got back, and again we didn't eat much. In fact, she didn't eat anything. She just drank a little coffee. She was more than worried now; she was scared for Duane. She didn't get up to clear the table after I'd finished eating, but just sat there with that frightened look in her eyes. And so it was already dark when we heard a clopping of hoofs in the ranchyard.

We both jumped up from the table and hurried through the house. She jerked open the front door and ran outside, then came to an abrupt halt. I stepped out behind her, and I saw that it wasn't Duane.

He was reined in facing the house, a lean, dark man with a rawhide look. He had his hands folded on his saddlehorn, and he leaned forward slightly with a pretense of a smile.

"Howdy, folks. Would this be the Cameron place?"

I stood just behind Janet. I put my hands on her shoulders. Looking at the stranger, I nodded and said, "It's the Cameron place. Why?"

"I'm looking for a friend of mine. He once mentioned that Matt Cameron was also a friend of his. I happened to be out this way, so I thought I'd stop and see if he was here right now."

I squeezed Janet's shoulders, warning her to let me do the talking. I said, "Sure, we know Tom. But he's not here." I was gripped by excitement. I wondered if this man were Shard or Durango or Tolbert. I was sure he was one of the three. "You'll find him down in Texas."

He shook his head, still showing that false smile. "I doubt it. Tom got into trouble down there. I trailed him north, and I figure he's somewhere in No Man's Land. When did you folks see him last?"

"Yesterday morning," I said. "And when he left, he said he had to see a man down in Texas. We know about his trouble down there, but he was sure that he wouldn't run into any lawmen. Say, are you one of the men who was in that mess with him?"

"That's right. Shard's my name—Ed Shard. He talk about me?"

"Yeah."

"Did he say anything about meeting me in New Mexico?"

"Yeah. Over in the Black Range. He said you had a ranch there."

Shard thought about that, then said, "Maybe I had him figured wrong. Maybe he was going to look me up, after all." He smiled again. "How about giving a hungry traveler a bite to eat?"

I patted Janet's shoulder. "How about some grub, honey?" I turned her to the door, and she must have sensed that I wanted to be alone with Shard. She hurried inside. I looked at Shard. "Step down and go inside," I invited. "I'll take care of your horse."

"Thanks, he said, and dismounted and handed me the horse's reins.

I led the animal toward the corral, looking around for the other two. They were close by; I sensed it, but it was too dark for me to spot them. I was about to offsaddle Shard's horse when he called to me and came across the yard.

He said, "I've got a bottle in there, Cameron." He'd taken it for granted that I was the owner of the place. "We'll have a drink, eh?"

He stepped over to the horse, and then swung around fast, drawing his gun. I grabbed for mine, but he'd caught me off guard. Before mine cleared its holster, the barrel of his clubbed down across my right wrist. The blow was so hard that my arm was numbed by pain. My six-shooter fell to the ground. I swore and threw myself at him, trying to get hold of his gun with my left hand. He dodged and drove a knee into my groin, and then, as I doubled up with pain, he hit me again with his gun. This time it was alongside the head. I was knocked to the ground, and I sprawled out dazed and helpless.

Dimly, I heard him call out, "All right. I drew his fangs. Come on in!"

I tried to get up, but couldn't rise farther than my hands and knees. Everything was spinning crazily. My head felt as though it had burst open. I managed to lift it, and saw two riders come into the yard from behind the barn. They reined in

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close by. My brain began to clear, and I began to get sore—at myself, for being taken so easily. I stared at the two newcomers, deciding that the burly one was Mel Tolbert—Ben Morgan's killer. I felt full of hate.

"Good work, Ed," Tolbert said. "Who's this?"

"Matt Cameron."

"Anybody else around?"

"His missus. And some looker she is."

"What about Duane?"

Shard said, "Cameron claims that punk headed back to Texas yesterday. It could be that he's telling the truth. He didn't try to deny that he knew Duane or that Duane had been here. But maybe we'd better have a look around."

I managed to get to my feet. My legs were wobbly, so I sagged against the corral fence. I decided to let them go on believing that I was Matt Cameron and that Janet was my wife. It might keep them from bothering us too much. But I was sick at heart. Here I was face to face with Ben Morgan's murderer and couldn't do anything about it. I watched Tolbert and Durango dismount. Like his name, Durango was Mexican.

Tolbert said, "What's his woman doing?"

Shard chuckled. "Making supper for me."

Tolbert laughed too. "Take him over to the house and tell her she's got more company. Jake and I will be in after we look around the other buildings."

Shard said, "Let's go, friend," and gestured at me with his six-shooter.

I shoved away from the fence, stepped over my gun on the ground, headed for the house. I'd never felt so damned helpless.

TOLBERT and Durango had come into the kitchen after searching the bunkhouse and barn for Tom Duane, and they wolfed down the grub Janet had set out. They'd looked over Janet, then grinned and winked at each other. Every now and then one or the other eyed her, and that was beginning to get me. Janet ignored them and stayed over by the stove. I was at the opposite side of the kitchen, sitting on the floor with my back to the wall. I'd been standing, but Tolbert had growled at me, "Sit down, you. You're making me nervous."

He was a big man, about forty, with a ruddy complexion and a rust-red bristle on his heavy face. Durango was younger, under thirty, a wiry little man with shifty eyes. Ed Shard was the tricky one of the bunch, and when he was done eating, he turned to me and said real quick, "When'll Duane be back?"

He must have hoped to surprise me into saying something I didn't want to say, but this time I was alert. "He didn't say, and that's the truth," I told him. "He said he had to see a man in Texas. That's all he said."

"He took the money with him?"

"He didn't have any money. None that I saw, anyway."

Shard swore. "He had thirty thousand dollars, mister," he said. "Maybe he didn't show it to you, but—"

I cut in, "He claimed that he never got his cut of that money. He told us that he was picked up and put in jail and that he escaped. If he'd had any money like you say, the law would have taken it from him. Anybody could see that."

"Don't get smart with us," Shard said, scowling. "The law didn't find the money. Duane hid it before he was grabbed, and my idea is that he went to get it after he busted out of jail."

"Why'd you trust him with it in the first place?"

"We didn't."

"Then how—"

Shard called Duane an ugly name. "He pulled a smart one on us," he said. "A bunch of riders from San Marco were right behind us when we got to the Morada Hills. We decided to split up. Jake—" he nodded toward the Mexican—"had the fastest horse and was the best rider. We figured he could get away with the loot. So I gave him the saddlebags holding the specie, and all of us rode off in different directions. Or so we thought. But Duane followed Jake and caught up with him before he got

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started right. He gunwhipped Jake and took those saddlebags. Jake was knocked off his horse, and it was only by luck that he wasn't seen by that posse. They caught sight of Duane a few minutes later and took after him. They were still after him when Jake lost sight of them."

I looked across at Janet. She had to believe it of Tom Duane now. She did, I knew, for there was despair in her eyes.

I said, "He didn't have any saddlebags when he was here. It looks to me as though he didn't get the money after he escaped—and is going after it now."

That made them think, the other two looking inquiringly at Shard. He took out a cigar, lighted it, threw the match to the floor. He puffed on the cigar in silence for a couple of minutes.

Then he said, "Could be. But we're not going to Texas after him and maybe not be able to find him. You're not going to get rid of us that easy, mister. After we heard that he'd escaped from jail, we tried to figure out where he'd head. I remembered him saying he had friends in No Man's Land. It took me a while to recall that the name of his friends was Cameron. Once I recalled it, we just asked the way to the Cameron ranch. Now that we're here, we'll hang around. He'll be back. He doesn't dare stay in Texas."

Mel Tolbert said, "Yeah, we'll wait. This is an all right hangout." He looked around at Janet. "Fetch me some more coffee, sweetheart."

Janet got the coffee pot off the stove and moved in a dazed fashion to the table. She was badly upset by having found out the truth about Duane, and I felt a sudden sympathy for her. It was hard to love someone and then learn that he was rotten through and through. Janet started to pour coffee into Tolbert's cup. He reached out and put his arm about her waist, pulling her against him. I started to rise, knowing how Janet would react.

She reacted more violently than I expected, however. She broke away from Tolbert, and then, as he grabbed at her with both hands, she flung the contents of the pot into his face. The coffee was right off the hot stove, and it scalded Tolbert. The man not only released her, but jumped to his feet. He pawed at his face, screaming in pain.

Both Shard and Durango jumped up, and so did I.

I yelled, "Run, Janet! Run!"

I leaped at Shard, slamming into him and hurling him bodily against Durango. I saw Janet flee through the back door, then I closed in on Shard again and tried to get his gun. I missed my grab because his hand was on the weapon. I slugged him at the base of the skull, dropping him. Durango swore in Spanish and got his gun out. I whirled toward the door. Behind me a gun exploded. The slug must have missed me by an inch. Before Durango could fire again I was out of the house. I saw Janet running toward the creek, downstream toward the stretch of rough country. I ran after her.

DURANGO opened fire from the door, shooting as fast as he could work hammer and trigger. My back felt as broad a target as the side of a barn.

But I was a running target, and that and Durango's coming from a lighted room into the darkness outside threw off his aim. His slugs came close enough for me to hear the whine of them, but his gun went empty without his hitting me. I overtook Janet and caught her about the waist, just as she stopped running. She was breathless and badly shaken. I kept her moving along, headed her toward the brush and rocks downstream where we would have some cover.

We passed the spot where I'd seen Janet bathing that night, then came directly opposite the place where I had been camped when I heard her in the water. I said, "This way," and we forded the creek, coming into the brush thicket on the opposite bank. We hurried toward the bluffs beyond, and halted by the base of them where the shadows were deep enough to hide us. She sank to the ground. I hunkered down by her.

"Oh, Jim—"

She came into my arms, crying. I didn't

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know whether she was crying because she was scared or because she was heartbroken over finding out the truth about Tom Duane. I held her close, and wished that she would realize that it was there she belonged—in my arms.

I was plenty ashamed of not having been able to protect her. In all my years in the Rangers, I'd never let any tough-hands disarm me. I wondered if I'd lost my ability to take care of myself when I stopped wearing my badge. My rifle stood against the front wall of the house, and my six-shooter lay in the ranch yard over by the corral. I had to find a way to get one or the other or I would be killed and Janet would fall into their hands.

She whispered, "Jim, what can we do?"

I told her that I had to try to get a gun.

She clung to me. "You haven't a chance!"

"I have a chance so long as it's dark, but when morning comes they'll have no trouble finding us."

"If only Dad and the boys would get here!"

"There's no use thinking about that, honey."

"I sent Miguel after them."

"So that's where he went, to Kansas after Matt and your brothers."

She nodded. "I thought I needed their help to keep you from taking Tom back to Texas," she said. "I expected them to get home before now, but they must have gone somewhere else after selling the trail-herd—and Miguel missed them at Dodge. Jim, if we could get horses—"

"It's no use wishing for an easy way out," I said. "I've got to get a gun and fight them. You stay here." I took my arms from about her. "Where is the nearest ranch?"

"The Whittaker brothers have a cow camp about ten miles north."

"You know the Whittakers?"

"Yes. They're all right."

"If anything goes wrong, you start walking toward their camp," I said. "Circle wide around your own place, then strike out toward the Whittaker camp."

I started to rise, but she caught my arm.

"Yes, Janet?"

"I—I want you to know I've changed my mind about Tom."

"I know."

She shook her head. "No, not all. It wasn't only because I found out from them that he's what you claimed. Now I think I suspected him all the while, ever since he came here—suspected that he had changed, I mean, or that he was only lately showing his real character. As for being in love with him—well, he was the only man who ever courted me, and that must have made me believe that I was in love with him. I knew different when you kissed me today."

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "You mean you're in love with me?"

"I don't know. I can't trust my own feelings. All I know is that I was mistaken in what I felt for Tom," she said unhappily. "I may be mistaken again, about you."

I was disappointed, but I saw that at least I had a right to hope, now that she realized that Tom Duane was the wrong man for her. I said, "Give me an hour, and then clear out." I left her before she could protest.

I GOT AS FAR AS the brush thicket by the creek before I heard somebody prowling in the darkness. I sank to the ground, and after a minute or two saw a shadowy figure moving about on the opposite side of the stream. Durango, I imagined. He halted by the cottonwood tree about a hundred yards away, peering about and listening for sounds of Janet and me. I imagined that he was leery of searching alone, even though he knew I was unarmed. I had some notion of attempting to cross the creek to jump him, but I realized that I couldn't take him by surprise.

I lay there a long time watching him, and he didn't move. It seemed that he sensed that I was close and might attack him if he moved. I was sure that he was scared when he began backing away from the cottonwood toward the ranch buildings.

I waited until he was out of sight, and then crossed the creek and headed north

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at a dogtrot. Well beyond the buildings, which I couldn't see from there, I turned west across the grass flat. I could see the buildings now, or the lighted windows of the house. I moved gradually toward the place, slowing to a walk, and then, drawing close to the barn, I dropped to the ground. The barn blotted out my view of the yard, but I could hear a muttering of voices from there. I crawled toward the barn.

I reached the rear wall, and paused there wondering how I was to get on the yard side of the corral without being seen, and wondering too if one of them had thought to pick up my gun. I had a fear that Shard would have thought of that.

I no longer heard their voices, but there was a sudden drumming of hoofs.

My first thought was that they were clearing out, but then I realized that there were only two horses leaving. Two of the three outlaws were going to search for Janet and me, and one had stayed at the ranch buildings. That cut down the odds for me, but I was afraid for Janet. I had to make a play right away, to draw the two away from that stretch of rough country. I moved to the corner of the barn, peered around it into the corral. The horses in the pen were quiet, and I hoped my presence wouldn't spook them and alert the man left behind. It didn't. I crawled along the north side of the corral, then along the west side. I now had the yard before me. Somebody was standing in the doorway of the house and I could see the red glow of a cigar or cigarette.

I hugged the ground and looked along the front section of the corral fence, trying to spot my six-shooter. I'd dropped it near the corral gate, close to where Shard's horse stood. I couldn't see the gun.

But if it wasn't there, I still could arm myself. There was a rifle on the horse's saddle, and the chances were that it was loaded. A man like Ed Shard wouldn't carry an unloaded gun, I reflected. And, since this was his horse, I knew that it was Shard in the doorway. I'd have to be careful, for he was the smartest of the trio.

I dragged myself toward the ground-hitched horse, my heart in my mouth. I snaked my way along an inch at a time, expecting every second that he would see me. I made it to within a few feet of the horse without any gun opening up at me, but then the animal spooked. It snorted with fright, shied away. I jumped up and grabbed at its trailing reins, but missed them. The horse turned away, tossing its head. I tried to reach across its saddle for the rifle. My fingers touched the stock, and that was all. Across the yard, Shard yelled something, and then his gun crashed.

I swung away from the horse, dropped to the ground. My lost six-shooter lay six feet beyond me. Shard fired again, and the slug kicked dirt into my face. I scrambled after the gun and got it. He was out in the open now, running at me, but the skittish horse had swung over in front of me and he couldn't get a bead on me. I fired under the bronc's belly, and Shard yelped an oath and came to a halt. The horse bucked away from me, and both of us fired the instant it was gone. I heard Shard's slug hit the fence behind me, and I saw him stagger as mine hit him. For a moment he stood swaying, trying to bring his revolver to bear, then he pitched forward onto his face and didn't move again.

I sprinted for the house and found my rifle still leaning against the sod wall. I holstered my six-shooter, caught up the Winchester, ran into the house. Reaching the kitchen, I blew out the lamp flame and in the inky darkness I closed the kitchen door and barred it. I returned to the front door, stepped into the yard, and heard the other two returning at a hard run. The shooting had served another purpose besides doing for Ed Shard; it had also kept Tolbert and Durango from finding Janet. I levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber, and braced myself. Then caution came to me, and I stepped back into the doorway.

FEAR IS only natural when there's violence and sudden death, when a man has no knowledge of whether or not he'll be alive when the guns stop blasting. But afterwards all I remembered feeling was an eagerness for the showdown with

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Mel Tolbert. He and Durango made it easy for me. They came loping into the yard, pulling their horses to a rearing halt in the middle of it. They had their guns in their hands. They looked around, not able to make out what had happened because of the darkness. They saw somebody sprawled out there, and they saw somebody else in the doorway of the house. They could not be sure whether it was me dead and Shard alive or the other way around.

"Ed?" It was Tolbert's voice. "Ed, that you?"

"Ed Shard is dead, Tolbert," I called out. "As for you—"

"Now, hold on, Cameron. You have no call to start a gunfight. We—"

"My name's not Cameron, Tolbert. It's Bannister."

A startled oath burst from the outlaw. "The Ranger that let Duane escape?"

Durango gasped, "A Ranger! *Por Dios!*"

Tolbert tried to play it cagey. "Listen, Ranger; you've got no authority here in No Man's Land. You know that."

"I quit the Rangers, Tolbert. I'm on my own. I don't need to bother about the rules that say a lawman can't act in No Man's Land. I'm taking you back to Texas. Or if you'd rather have it that way I'll shoot it out with you."

"Why, Bannister? What's it to you?"

I'd been waiting to tell him. I wanted him to know that I was avenging Ben Morgan. I said, "The sheriff you murdered was like a father to me, Tolbert. Now drop your gun—or use it!"

He jerked his gun up and fired twice at me, at the same time wheeling his horse about in an attempt to make a run for it. I'd leveled my rifle with his first shot, and now drove my slug at him. It knocked him from the saddle, and his horse raced away with its empty stirrups flapping. Durango was in wild flight across the yard, twisting in the saddle to shoot at me. I swung my rifle up, but didn't squeeze the trigger. I'd gotten the man I was after, and one besides; I was suddenly sick of it. Durango did fire a shot at me, but it was a wild one. Then another gun opened up, from the side of the barn. Durango screamed and reeled in the saddle; then, just beyond the corral, he toppled from his horse.

I stared toward the barn, called, "Who's there?"

"A friend, Bannister."

It was Will Hanks's voice. He came across the yard, leading his horse with one hand and holding his gun in the other. He grinned, then spat tobacco juice, and said, "He's worth five hundred dollars, bucko—and you were letting him get away."

"There was no need to kill him," I said. "Well, it's done. How long have you been here?"

"I came in just as the shooting started," he said. "I was looking for those hombres, like I promised, but I missed them somehow. I met up with a friend of mine and he told me he'd seen three riders heading this way today. They'd asked him the way to the Cameron ranch. So I turned around, and here I am. There's a bounty on all three, eh?"

I said sourly, "Yeah, on all three," and turned away. I started away from there at a run, and said, "I'll be back," when he yelled out asking where I was going.

I went to get Janet.

WHEN I GOT BACK with her, Hanks met us at the edge of the yard and said, "Bannister, there's a rider coming this way. You hear him?"

Janet and I stopped. My arm was about her, and I felt her grow tense. The night was very still, now that the shooting was over, and sounds carried a great distance in that empty country. I heard what Hanks had heard minutes before, the rhythmic beat of hoofs as a horse traveled at a steady lope. The sound seemed to come from the south. I looked at Janet.

"That'll be Duane," I said. "Go into the house."

"Jim—"

"I'm going to take him back to Texas, Janet."

She was silent a moment, and then said

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tonelessly, "Yes. I think I understand."

I watched her go into the house, and knew what she meant. She understood that Tom Duane had to be taken back and given to the law. He'd embarked on a lawless career, and he wouldn't ever turn back.

The drumming of hoofs was loud now. He was close.

I looked at Hanks, and said, "Keep out of it. You hear?"

He nodded, then turned toward the barn with his horse in tow.

A few minutes later Duane rode in.

He stopped at the rear of the house, upsetting my plan to take him by surprise. By the time I got around back, Janet had lighted the lamp and admitted him to the kitchen. The door was open an inch or two, and I heard Duane's voice asking, "Jan, what's wrong?"

I didn't like the setup, for it wasn't likely that he'd give up without a fight and Janet would be endangered if there was gunplay. But I had no choice, so I pushed the door wide and stepped inside with my gun in my hand.

I got a break, for he had a pair of saddlebags draped over his right arm, and dropping them slowed his draw. I stepped in close, closed my left hand over the hammer of his gun so that he couldn't cock it. I jabbed my own gun into his ribs, and said, "Don't be a fool, Duane."

He stared at me with hate-filled eyes, but loosened his grip on his weapon. I took his gun and moved across the room to lay it on the side table, never taking my eyes off him.

He gave Janet an ugly look. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Tom, you've gone too far," she said. "I don't think you deserve help."

I said, "That's right, Duane. You've gone too far. If you'd played the game the way you said you had, I would have believed that you just made a fool mistake and wouldn't make a second. But you lied from start to finish, and there—" I gestured toward the saddlebags—"there's the proof of it."

He swore. "What did you expect me to do, take that money back to the San Marco bank? It's run by that crook, George Faber."

"I'm going to see what can be done about Faber when I go back to San Marco," I cut in. "But his being crooked doesn't give you the right to pull something like this. You're pretty low, friend. You even doublecrossed your partners. And it may interest you to know that the three of them are lying dead out in the yard. Because of you, they came here and endangered Janet."

That bothered him not at all. He said, "There's the money, the whole thirty thousand. Take it back to George Faber and forget the sermon!"

"You don't understand," I told him. "I'm taking you back, too."

"You can't, Bannister. The law can't touch me here in No Man's Land."

"You're forgetting that I'm no longer the law. I'm just an ordinary citizen, and there's no law to say what I can or can't do here."

He didn't say anything to that. A sickly look of despair spread over his face.

I had a pair of handcuffs in my saddlebags, and I figured I'd take him to where I'd left my saddle and horses, over by the creek, and put the cuffs on him. I gestured with my gun, and said, "Pick up the money, Duane."

He stooped slowly, picked up the saddlebags, and both Janet and I watched him so closely that neither of us were aware of Will Hanks until he stepped through the doorway behind me and pressed the muzzle of his gun into my back.

Hanks said, "Drop your gun, Bannister. Don't make me kill you."

I'd started violently. "What's this?"

"You can take him back to Texas, friend, but I'm taking the money."

"Don't be a fool, man. You've played it straight so far. Don't change now."

"Like Duane said, forget the sermon. This is too much to pass up. The reward offered for these hombres is chicken feed compared to the loot. Drop your gun."

"Hanks, I'll come after you."

"You won't catch me. You don't know this country like I do." He jabbed harder

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with his gun. "I can fix it so that you won't go anywhere, Bannister."

I EASED my gun off cock and let it drop to the floor. Hanks took his gun away from my back, and out of the corner of my eye I saw his arm swing up. Janet cried out a warning to me, but I was already ducking. Hanks aimed the blow to catch me at the base of the skull, but my sudden move caused him to miss except for the barrel of the gun grazing my back. And missing a blow like that, with so much power behind it, threw him off balance. I whirled and grappled with him. A gun—not Hank's—blasted. He cried out and fell away from me, sagging to the floor. I swung around and saw that Duane had gotten his gun off the side table. Having downed Hanks, he now turned the gun on me. Janet cried out and caught hold of his arm. The shot went wild. I grabbed my gun off the floor and leapt at him, knocking him to the floor.

I took Janet by the arm and led her to the parlor. She collapsed against me, trembling violently, and it was a long time before she got a grip on herself. I didn't blame her for being upset. I held her close and thought how game she had been. But, as she told me later, I should have expected it of a girl living in No Man's Land. . . .

I left the Cameron ranch with my prisoner and the bank's money without getting Janet to admit that she was in love with me. I was able to leave the next morning without worrying that she would be alone, because Miguel returned during the night with word that her father and brothers were on their way. Miguel and I buried the dead men at dawn, and then I headed for Texas.

I turned Tom Duane and the money over to the acting sheriff at San Marco and reported the whole affair to the commanding officer of my old Ranger company. Not only was the black mark against my name removed from the record, but I was also given the opportunity to tear up my resignation. I didn't.

Before leaving my old outfit, I told the commanding officer what I'd heard about George Faber of the Bank of San Marco pulling some deals that weren't honest banking, and he promised to investigate.

I waited a full three months, spending my time at the little ranch that was mine under Ben Morgan's will. Then I set out for No Man's Land again.

When I rode up to the Cameron ranch, it was sundown and Janet's menfolk had just ridden in and were off-saddling their broncs over by the corral. I felt as bashful as any young buckaroo about to meet his girl's folks for the first time, and those Camerons didn't make it easy.

Matt primed the others by calling out, "Keep moving, drifter. We don't hand out meals to saddlebums."

He was a burly, sorrel-bearded man. His three sons as big as he was, and as rough looking.

One said, "By the looks of him, he's not even a first-rate saddlebum, Pa."

Another said, "Yeah, this country sure is going to the dogs—the kind of hombres that are drifting into it."

The third said, "Somebody yell boo at him and he'll hightail it, sure."

I said, "Where were you hombres when all the shooting was going on? Hiding out in the bushes?" I turned toward the house, seeing Janet appear at the door. I reined in, sat there looking at her. She was more beautiful than I remembered. I said, "I gave you three months, honey. By now you should know how you feel.

She looked past me, at Miguel and the Cameron menfolks. They were watching, their faces showing grins, thinking it funny that a man should come courting. She made a face at them.

"You waited too long, Jim," she said to me. "I thought you were never coming. Supper is about ready, and I've already set a place for you. Come on in."

I dismounted and went into the house with her. We didn't get back to the kitchen right away, but stopped in the parlor for a spell. She came into my arms as though she belonged there—which she did.

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Bolton heard the drumming of hoofs and yelping of Indians

DEVIL'S NOTCH

By W. J. Reynolds

THE KID set a good trap—but it caught the wrong victim

AS SHERIFF JOHN BOLTON rode among the huge, scattered boulders that jumbled the entrance to the canyon, he came abruptly upon the girl seated on a rock. His .44 Colt came into his hand, the hammer under his thumb, half back as he stared at her. Her face was composed except for the mouth, which showed pain in its tight corners. She looked at him with a numb calm. Past fear, maybe.

"What the hell—" Bolton bit his words off and his alert gray eyes moved rapidly, scanning the canyon's shoulders for a hidden gunman.

She said, "I'm alone. He's been gone since daylight." She pointed to her left leg, stretched out upon her crumpled boots. "I'm hurt. I think my ankle is fractured."

He glanced at the swollen leg, the puffed and angry ankle with the jagged wound. Fear was in her wide brown eyes, seemingly released by her words, and close under it was plain panic. She was in a bad way, no doubt of that.

Bolton swung off his horse and walked

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up to her, holstering his drawn gun. Her wide-eyed gaze followed him, and seeing the stirring in her eyes, he said quickly, "You were the one with Permain? The Gila Kid?"

Her eyes darkened. Then she nodded, and a faint touch of anger showed in her face. "Yes," she said, and the anger seemed to ease away the approaching hysteria. "Yes, he left me this morning, at daylight. You'll never catch him. He has six hours start and two horses."

"He took your horse and left you afoot—and hurt?" His gray eyes chilled, a hard contrast in his sweaty, dusty face. He went on without waiting for her answer, "I was to find you, afoot and hurt, and that would assure his escape to the Border. That was the idea, wasn't it?"

"He said you wouldn't leave me, and especially not with the Apache smoke signals since yesterday. He said you'd have to take me back to a doctor." There was no triumph in her voice, no hope, just the faint anger.

Bolton hitched his gunbelt, staring at her, trying to make up his mind about her. She was no dancehall girl, or else she was mighty new at it, for none of the usual dissipation marked her smooth face. Her eyes, except for the pain, were fine and open, and her lips could be smooth and smiling and generous.

He looked at the ashes of the small Indian fire and recalled the column of smoke he'd seen here this morning. That smoke hadn't come from this fire. He turned his gaze to her again.

"That fire didn't make the smoke I saw this morning."

She shook her head. "No. I saw the smoke too. It was in the canyon, or on the other side. Permain built it, I suppose, after he left me. I haven't decided if it was meant for you—or the Indians."

"I was coming this way," he said evenly. "I had to, or ride thirty miles around."

She nodded. "He meant it for the Indians then. He's scared of you, Sheriff. It would please him to know the Indians had done the job for him—killed us both."

Bolton didn't answer. She had it all figured out, and she was close enough to the truth. He squatted to examine the girl's leg. She gasped as he touched the ankle but shut her lips tightly and made no further sound as he looked at it. It was bad. The ankle was badly swollen and in the puffed flesh was the jagged wound, red and angry, and near it was a smaller, lesser wound. His eyes narrowed at the older bruise, then he looked at her.

"You got a grudge against this ankle? Or did it take two tries to make the hurt effective?"

"Two tries," she said without hesitation. "I did the first, but it wouldn't have fooled you. Permain did the bad one this morning. While I was still asleep. There's the proof." She nodded at a fist-sized rock, the edges jagged, with dried blood on them.

BOLTON cursed under his breath, and wondered at the things women would endure for those they loved. She must know that her chances of getting out of here alive were remote. And if she did get out alive, the leg might never be any good. He could picture Permain, the self-styled Gila Kid, easing the blanket from the sleeping girl's feet and slamming the already sore ankle with the jagged stone.

He looked at her from flat, hard gray eyes. "You must think a hell of a lot of your boy friend. Don't you realize that some Apache brave will likely have your hair in his belt before night? Or that blood poison will fix you if the Indians don't?"

"I realize that," she said. "I've had all the morning to think of it." Her voice went quiet and held a still fury. "As for my boy friend, I hate him. I hope you do catch him. And he's not my boy friend. He's my step-brother."

Bolton stared at her, his eyes no longer chill but wary and holding pity. She saw the pity and flushed angrily, and then said sharply, "Don't pity me, Sheriff. I have no one to blame but myself. I knew how he was when he was a boy; my mistake was in thinking he had changed." She glanced at the overhead sun that boiled down upon them. "You still have a chance, Sheriff, if you'll forget your badge when you come

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to the Border. You're not as heavy as Permain, and can undoubtedly ride better. He'll stop in the first saloon across the Border to drink and brag."

He nodded, and put his attention on making a smoke so that she could not see the temptation in his eyes. He could get Permain yet. He could get him there across the Border and forget his badge only a few minutes. Permain was hell on horses, and even with two, Bolton thought he could still gain some time.

But the girl would die. If the Indians didn't get her, the blood poisoning would. Ten hours to the Border, another two to get Permain, and ten back. From here to Conteau City, still another twelve hours. Thirty-four hours at the best.

There wouldn't be even a chance for the leg—or her life.

"How come you're with Permain?"

"He couldn't come back to Kansas for his inheritance because he had a charge against him. Our parents were killed three months ago. I was bringing Floyd Permain his part. He was supposed to've been working on a ranch, making good. He even wanted me to go in with him to buy it out. I found he was actually living in a shack in the brush, an outlaw. I didn't know that he'd murdered and robbed a rancher of his payroll until we'd already started for the Border."

"And the inheritance?" Bolton said. "He also took your part along."

"Yes."

He stood up. "We'll have to move on. Those Apaches that jumped the reservation last week are around somewhere. It's nearer to the Border than back to Conteau City. We'll find a doctor down there."

"No," she said quickly. "Go on, Sheriff, and catch him. He's a wolf. He's worse than that; he's not fit to live."

"It's going to hurt to ride," he said. "But you'll have to try." He turned and got his horse and led it up beside her; then he lifted her and set her in the saddle. Her face was white but no sound came from her. "Can you stand it?"

"You said I had to," she returned, but the attempt at lightness was belied by the sudden sweat on her face, and her eyes, slightly glazed from the pain.

He led the horse onward into the canyon, not wanting to look at her. She would have to stand it. He ignored her occasional gasps as the horse jarred her, and gave all his attention to the trail ahead, and once through the short canyon into the dry hills, he kept an alert lookout.

TWENTY BUCKS had jumped the reservation last week, and had already killed two prospectors and raided half a dozen outlying ranches. These two would be fine game for the warlike bucks—and Permain's fire would help betray them. The fact that the Indians were hard pressed by the cavalry and had split into two or three parties wouldn't increase their chances. And it wouldn't make the Apaches any more considerate of a victim, knowing what would happen to them if they were caught.

An hour before dark, Bolton picked a camp spot against a ragged bluff and lifted the girl from the horse and lay her in the notch of the cliff, a spot twenty feet in diameter that would give them cover from all directions but the entrance. He staked his horse in a sparsely grassed clearing in the brush near the seep. The seep was heavily mineral but they could use it. Bolton filled his canteen and coffee pot and went back to the notch.

The girl lay on the warm sand, face dead white and with her mouth clamped tight. Silently, Bolton built a fire, taking a little longer to make sure it didn't smoke, and then set the pot on to heat. When it was hot, he set it near the girl and got his spare shirt from the saddlebag and dipped it in the water and squeezed out the surplus.

"This'll hurt," he said. "But it'll help."

He lay the steaming shirt over the swollen ankle and the girl screamed. Bolton was sweating, himself, and very little of the sweat was from the heat. But he kept wetting the shirt and the girl bit her lips until they bled but she didn't scream again. Finally, she grew less tense and Bolton set the pot back on the coals and added more water. She slept and Bolton kept up the soaking for another hour; and when the leg

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was red with the heat of the water and not with the angry streaks of poison, he cleaned his pot and made coffee and cooked his small store of bacon and flapjacks.

He woke her and she ate her share and then Bolton heated more water. "Hard to beat hot water with salts in it," he said. "This water's got just about everything in it from the taste, but it's the best I can do."

"It's fine; it doesn't hurt any more." She lay looking at him in the dusk and the pain had gone from the eyes. The fear too. "I'm Lilly Conway," she said, "and I thank you, John Bolton. I can see why Floyd Permain is afraid of you. He fears you because others trust you."

Soon she slept again, and John Bolton sat outside the notch and kept his ears open and his attention on his horse below him. The animal would scent the approach of Indians long before he could see or hear them. Once he stood up, listening, thinking he heard the popping of shots; but he didn't hear the sound again, and finally went in to lie down near Lilly Conway and sleep.

He was up before dawn and had the small fire going when the girl said, "Good morning, Sheriff. I slept well. You're a good doctor."

He gave her a brief smile and moved to look at the ankle. It appeared less swollen and the red streaks weren't there, only the redness of blistered flesh from the hot water. "It looks better," he said. "We'll give it another treatment."

He repeated the soaking process and later made the last of his coffee and they each had a cup. "That's our breakfast," he said. "We should be in Cibo by noon."

He saddled his horse and brought it to the notch and helped her into the saddle. "Take the reins," he said, "and stay behind me." He moved out of the notch and down the slope and turned south.

Bolton's own lips were tight as the blisters of yesterday seemed to set his feet afire. He hadn't dared remove his boots last night, for he'd never have gotten them on again today. But despite the pain he moved steadily, and behind him he could hear the sound of the horse.

The sun lifted abruptly over the low hills and grew hot quickly. Bolton stopped suddenly, head cocked, and behind him the girl drew her horse up. To Bolton's ears came the faint drumming of hoofs and the wild yelping of Indians. He moved back to the horse and leaped up behind the girl.

"Indians?" Her voice was quiet.

"Yes. They can't see us, so they must be after somebody else. We'll go back to the notch. It's good as any place and better than most for a stand." He turned the horse and kicked it into a run.

The yells behind them grew louder as they dismounted at the notch, and Bolton could hear the pop of shots now with the drums of hoofs.

BOLTON helped the girl to a seat against one side of the notch and secured his horse to a jagged splinter of outcropping on the opposite side. He moved back to the opening with his rifle. He took a long look and then turned to give the girl a sharp glance. "What kind of horse was Permain riding?"

"His was a bay," she said. "Mine was a sorrel mare."

He nodded. "He's riding the mare now." His voice was hard. "They might go past us and not notice our sign, being hot after Permain that way."

"Yes," she agreed. Her eyes darkened. "Unless you take a few shots at them." She met Bolton's steady gaze for a long moment and then she said, "Go ahead, Sheriff, you're the kind of man that would never be happy if you didn't, even though Permain deserves to die."

He smiled briefly at her and a faint smile touched her own lips, turning them soft. He turned for the opening and moved down to a breast-high boulder and laid the rifle barrel over it. Bolton counted six Apaches, close now, after the fleeing Permain who was bent over his saddle, spurring and flailing at the horse with his quirt.

Scared stiff, Bolton thought, the self-created Gila Kid, the curly wolf himself. Bolton drew aim on the leading Indian and fired. He shifted his sights and fired again, twice.

The two Indians flipped from their

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horses, to roll on the gravel and ball up against patches of brush. The others instantly disappeared against the sides of their horses and swerved to cover in brush and wash. Permain yelled loudly and beat his horse toward Bolton.

He watched, his cold eyes upon Permain as the outlaw pounded up the slope and flung himself from his horse. "They had me penned all afternoon and last night!" he yelled. "I made a run for it this morning and got through—" His voice trailed off as he recognized Bolton and looked into the rifle muzzle.

"Throw the rifle down, Permain," Bolton said, "and drop your gunbelt."

Rage flushed Permain's narrow face and flared the light hazel eyes. "Damn you, Bolton," he snarled. "If it wasn't for you I might have some luck! I ain't got no shells. You got to give me some. Them Injuns'll stake us all to an ant hill!"

"Four Indians?" Bolton asked. "Hell, they'll light out soon as they can." His lips loosened under the three-day beard and he grinned without humor at Permain. "They done me a favor; now I'll do them one."

Bolton flung Permain's rifle into the brush downslope and stuck his .45 in his own waistband. Both guns were empty, and so was Permain's shell belt. Permain grumbled curses as Bolton prodded him into the notch.

Permain stopped as he saw Lilly Conway, and Bolton watched his face work with surprise, and then an ingratiating grin crossed it. Permain had had no thoughts of the girl he'd left behind until now, and now his thoughts would be all for some way to help himself.

"Lilly, are you all right?" Permain asked. He laughed. "Didn't I say Bolton would take better care of you than I would? You got me to thank for that, Lilly."

Lilly's eyes were dark with contempt as she looked at her step-brother. She didn't answer for a full minute, and then she said, "Too bad it had to be the Indians the sheriff shot instead of you!"

"Ah, Lilly," Permain protested, "it was my neck or your ankle. I'd a done as much, or more, for you."

"You're a liar as well as a murderer," she said calmly. "Why did you build that fire in the pass? You hoped the Indians would get there about the time Sheriff Bolton did."

Permain snarled. "I ought to've killed you!"

"Lilly," Bolton said, handing the girl one of his pistols, "hold this on him and see that he stays put. I'll see if the Indians leave or decide to give us a whirl."

"Don't worry, Sheriff," she said. "I'll watch him all right." She took the .44 and pulled the hammer to cock and pointed it at Permain. "Don't think I won't use it either, Floyd," she said.

IT WAS PLAIN that she meant it. Bolton looked at Permain and saw the fear in the narrow face, the knowledge that he was caught, that there would be no help from Lilly. Bolton walked back to his rock to put his attention to the brushy terrain below where he had last seen the Indians.

There was no sign of them now. The dead were gone and so were the horses. Then farther out Bolton caught the slight movement in the brush and rocky washes and intent study revealed the Apaches. They were leaving, and Bolton nodded, satisfied. They weren't foolish enough to attack; there would be at least two men here they knew of, and they were well forted up.

Bolton stood up and called toward the notch, "No more Indians today, Lilly; they've gone."

Lilly screamed suddenly and a gun roared there in the notch. On the heels of Lilly's cry and the gunshot, Permain yelled triumphantly, with the meaty sound of a fist meeting soft flesh. Bolton dropped the rifle, jerked his second gun and leaped for the notch.

As he rounded into the notch he was met with Permain's yell, "Hold it, Bolton! Drop that gun!"

Bolton stopped. Permain had the white-faced Lilly held in front of him and the gun Lilly had had was jutted at Bolton from Permain's hand. Lilly was fighting at the sand on her face and in her eyes.

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"Drop that gun, Bolton!" Permain ordered. "You can't shoot without hitting the girl!"

Bolton let the .44 fall from his hand, and then moved away at Permain's order, stopping near his horse. Permain released Lilly and shoved her viciously away. She fell and choked back the cry of pain as her ankle struck the firm sand. She sat up and stared at Permain from pain-filled eyes. Permain was grinning in high good humor.

"Well, this is a lot better than I figured for a while there! I got guns and shells and horses. Just think of the time you two can have here playing in the sand!" He laughed loudly.

"Get going, Permain," Bolton snapped. "While you can."

"Don't like my company, eh?" Permain laughed again. "You were hard enough after me for a while, Bolton." His narrow face went mean. "And don't get so free with your orders—I might just take a notion to leave you here permanent. You and the preaching girl. That way you wouldn't be coming after me." He looked from one to the other, licking his lips.

Bolton glared at him. "I ought to've let the Indians have you, Permain. There's not one of them ain't more of a man than you are." Rage loosened Bolton's tongue. "A man that would leave a crippled girl, then light a fire to bring the Apaches—if I ever lay eyes on you again, I'll kill you on sight!"

The snarl was back on Permain's mouth. "Maybe them Injuns will come in handy after all, Bolton. By the time the buzzards get through with you the Injuns'll get the blame anyway!"

Bolton knew Permain was going to kill him, and a gasp from Lilly told him that she knew it too. Permain snarled at her, "Shut up! I'll knock you on the head too. Both of you are too damned high and mighty for me. Get over there with her, Bolton. Get over there!" His voice became a high yell.

If he could just get close enough to have an even remote chance—Bolton moved past Permain, but the wily killer moved too, keeping a good eight feet between them.

Then Lilly threw the rock.

She threw the fist-sized missile hard, as a man would throw it. The rough rock hit Permain on the nose as he tried to dodge. The gun roared, the bullet jerking at Bolton's shirt as he leaped.

Then Bolton closed with the killer and his hand gripped Permain's wrist, twisting the gun aside as it bucked another bullet into the notch wall. Bolton wrenched at the arm with savage strength, levering the arm back and down. Permain screamed and the gun fell from his hand. Bolton kicked it and glimpsed Lilly scrambling for it.

BOLTON stepped back from Permain and hit the man with a solid strength, his fist slamming at Permain's chin. But the killer dodged the brunt of the blow, taking it on his jaw and shoulder. Then with a shout of fear and rage, Permain tore into Bolton, his fist swinging in fury.

The very ferocity of the attack unbalanced Bolton, and as he stepped back Permain kicked out at him. Bolton twisted, taking the blow on his hip and Permain's fist on his chin.

Bolton rolled away, and as Permain lunged at him, Bolton's boot turned on a rock and he stumbled, but his grasping hands fastened on Permain's and they went down together. Permain shoved his head forward and his teeth fastened in Bolton's neck.

Bolton drove his knee into Permain's belly and hurled himself aside. He heard Permain's teeth click together and felt the warmth of his own blood there. But the belly blow loosened Permain and brought a pained grunt from the man, and Bolton drove the knee in again and felt Permain's hold give way.

Bolton rolled free and swung a fist at Permain's chin. The outlaw slid away, and then swung a fist at Bolton's jaw. The blow jarred Bolton, shoving him backward as Permain turned and lunged for the entrance, and the gun that Bolton had dropped there on entering the notch.

"Now, Bolton!" Permain panted furiously. "Now, damn you—" He dived for the gun.

"Bolton!" Lilly screamed. "Here!"

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The gun Lilly had retrieved sailed through the air at Bolton and he snatched it, the butt slapping his palm as he whirled to meet Permain's shot.

Permain fired and Bolton felt the jar of the bullet on his ribs, and then he was seeing the spurts of flame and smoke from Permain's hand and was firing himself, feeling the kick of the big .44 in his hand.

Bolton stopped firing as he saw the gun sag in Permain's hand, and saw shock and breathlessness take the man there. Permain dropped the gun and fell over it, the front of his shirt showing a red stain.

After a moment, Bolton turned to Lilly and found the girl already beside him, her hands tight on his arm. "I'm sorry, Lilly, he said. "I wanted to take him back for the law."

"You had no choice," she said, her voice calm again. "He would have killed us."

She pulled the jumper back from his ribs and he saw her bite her lips.

He watched the soft curve of her cheek as she made a bandage from his spare shirt, and saw the softening of her lips as she bound it tightly around him.

"It doesn't hurt much, Lilly," he said.

His glance moved to Permain, and his eyes held a bitterness as he looked at her again.

"I wish it could have been otherwise. He was your kin."

Her hands were soft but firm on his unshaven cheeks. "He was no blood kin, John Bolton. He was always mean to me, but his father was a good man and never lost faith in Floyd. I promised him I'd see he got his inheritance. I did. That's all." She looked at him and he felt the hard pound of his heart.

The tightness left Bolton. The bitterness left his eyes, and he grinned. We'd better ride, Lilly, in case them Indians run into some friends. Us two cripples have got a far piece to go. If I start kissing you now, we'll still be here tonight!"

"You can establish your claim, Sheriff Bolton, can't you?"

"I reckon," Bolton said, and did.

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THE PEN IS MIGHTIER than the sword—but editor

Clint Farr was faced with a bull whip and a loaded gun

CLINT FARR heard the report that morning when he made his Friday visit to the sheriff's office, and decided to give it no more than a paragraph. A raid on a nester's shack was scarcely front page news in Carrizo, certainly not a story worth the time and expense of running down, neither of which he could afford. In the rush of press day he had copy to write, type to set and a four-page paper to print. Clint Farr scribbled a few notes, jammed them into his pocket and forgot the incident.

It was midafternoon when someone tapped on his door. Frowning at the interruption, he walked around the ancient Washington press into the cluttered space that served as office. A young woman stood on the platform walk outside, peering uncertainly at the chipped gilt letters which read: CARRIZO WEEKLY INDEPENDENT. JOB PRINTING. She caught his eye through the dusty glass and flushed slightly, then stepped inside.

Her glance shifted over the litter of old newspaper files and galley proofs and came back to his face. In a voice that sounded breathless and defiant and somehow frightened she said, "Are you the editor?"

Farr smiled. He was a tall, thin young man in scuffed boots and trousers frayed at the pockets. He needed a haircut and the pale shield of his face bore an expression that was mild, good-natured and faintly impatient. Wiping ink-stained hands on his apron, he plucked a pencil stub from behind one ear and said, "A news item?"

Her blue eyes held steady on his, suspicious and almost hostile. "Do you own the paper?"

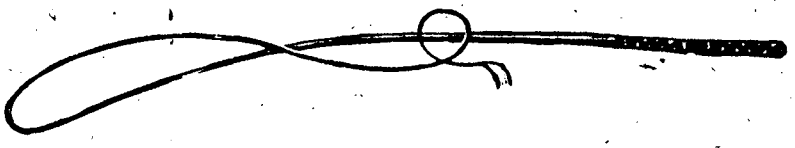
"More or less."

"I mean, can you print anything you want?"

"I'm not the *New York Herald*," Farr said cheerfully, "but I aim to please. Suppose you tell me what it is."

Her resolution seemed to falter. "It's an ad. A—a reward notice."

PAYOFF IN



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"Don't feel too bad," he said. "It wasn't so much of a paper."

CARRIZO

By Hal G. Evarts

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Farr lifted his eyebrows and stepped around the low office rail for a closer look. The sun slanting through the window cut across her harshly, revealing the cheap material of her dress and the veins of her red, work-chapped hands. Her face was angular and fine-boned, but it held a certain dignity that was its own beauty.

Farr noticed that her eyes were swollen. More gently he said, "Lost something, did you?"

The girl fumbled in her dress for a piece of folded paper and held it out. Farr saw that a number of words had been scratched out in the effort of composition and with some difficulty he read: "Reward of $100 offered to anyone with information leading to arrest of the three men who beat Tyce Barker on Squaw Creek last Thursday night and cut his fences. Cash. No questions asked."

Farr read the notice twice, slowly. "That wast last night? And you're—"

"His daughter. Addison Barker."

"Oh," Farr said and pursed his lips, remembering the notes in his pocket. He knew a great deal about her then, that she was a farm girl from one of the families homesteading out on the Bench. He knew too, just as surely, what the rest of her story would be. A warning whispered in his mind, because he had seen the same futile pattern so often in the Territory.

"They can't get away with this forever," she said fiercely. "Someone has to stand up to them. I thought maybe you—"

Farr drew a long breath. There was no point, he figured, in adding his troubles to hers. You didn't antagonize the big cattle outfits and the merchants who supported them, not if you had to live in the same town. That much he had learned in the year since he'd come to Carrizo with more enthusiasm than money. The lesson had been a painful, galling one and he said now, reluctant to hurt the girl, "Isn't this a job for the sheriff?"

Her lips curled. "You think the sheriff would lift one finger to help a homesteader?"

"Proctor may be hard," Farr said, "but he's honest."

"You too?"

Farr shrugged but the color crept higher in his cheeks. "I just print the facts. I can't mix into every local quarrel."

"Facts! Everyone knows who's behind this."

"I'll look into it," he promised. "But that's about all I can do."

The girl stared at him, then down at the floor and bit her lip. Abruptly she snatched the notice from his fingers. "No, thank you," she said. "I wouldn't want you to get into trouble on my account."

With lowered head she opened the door, slammed it behind her and almost ran. Farr watched her climb into a battered wagon and disappear down the street in a whirl of dust. Shaking his head, he tucked the pencil behind his ear and ran one hand through his hair. Then he gave the hell box a rattling kick and stripped off his apron.

THE HEAT struck at his shoulder blades as he stepped out onto the walk and he squinted against the glare before he angled across the street toward Nordyke's Palace Saloon. Two Hatrack punchers loafing there against the wall glanced up from under their hatbrims when he greeted them and gave him a grunt in return. Just ahead Les Hipple was pushing through the swing doors and Farr checked his stride, smelling the cool moist smoky air. He nodded and said, "Nice day, Les."

The Hatrack foreman halted, his solid, thick-shouldered body blocking the walk, and said briefly, "Howdy," in the flat indifferent tone Clint Farr had come to expect. He stood unmoving, pointedly waiting, and Farr stepped around him and moved on down the walk at a quicker pace.

He was still thinking of the girl, of the look in her eyes that had been close to contempt, when he climbed the steps to the office that fronted the jail. He peered in at the sandy-haired man who sat before a roll-top desk reading a newspaper. It was the *Pacosa Journal,* Farr noted wryly, the rival paper published in the county seat.

Junius Proctor lowered the paper and glanced up, his gaze stolid but not unfriendly. "Yes?" he said.

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"Anything new on the Barker case, Sheriff?"

"Barker? Oh, the homesteader."

"That's the one."

"Not a thing, son."

Farr frowned. He had always found this quiet, patient little man fair in his judgments and had counted on some measure of support, for Junius Proctor's reputation commanded respect even in Carrizo. "But you'll investigate?"

"Nothing to investigate," the sheriff said wearily. "Maybe you don't know that Barker shot a Hatrack steer on his place three weeks ago, before the fence was up."

"There's a big difference between shooting a steer and whipping a man," Farr said.

"Not to a cow-country jury."

Farr waited for him to enlarge on that, but after a deliberate silence the sheriff raised his paper and went on reading. It had been in Farr's mind to mention the reward but as he regarded the top of Proctor's head over the black columns of type his mouth tightened. In twelve months here he had lost most of his ambition, along with his fight, against the older established paper. It took more than good will, he had discovered, for a newcomer to make any place in Carrizo.

"Thanks for your time, Sheriff," he said dryly. "I know how busy you are."

He went straight to Dunn's stable and got his horse. Riding out of town, he took the Bench road and climbed into the hills with the smell of dust and sage strong in his nostrils. The soil was thin and rocky, but not too poor for graze, and as he topped a rise he could make out the spread of hard-scrabble outfits that had homesteaded along Squaw Creek. He forded the slim trickle, and after an inquiry turned into Tyce Barker's farm. It looked no more prosperous than the others—a dirt roof cabin of green willow logs and a half-built barn, set down in an expanse of plowed field.

A Mexican woman washing clothes in the yard watched him dismount beside the wagon and the girl came to the doorway. She eyed him gravely, no welcome on her face, but Farr lifted his hat and said, "I came to check those facts."

"Why?"

"You for one." He smiled. "For another, I'm my own reporter."

SHE STOOD ASIDE to let him enter and Farr ducked into a small, neat room that reeked of liniment. Adjusting his eyes to the dimness, he crossed to a corner bunk where a man lay face-down breathing in deep drugged sleep. He was frail and wispy-haired and Farr's glance took in the thick-soled shoes and patched and faded levis. Then the girl brought a lantern and he saw the raw red slashes crisscrossing Barker's back.

Farr swallowed and turned away.

Beside him the girl said, "The doctor says they'll heal, but he'll always carry those scars."

"A quirt?"

"A bull whip. Two of them held his arms and legs and the third man lashed him."

Barker moaned and stirred on his blanket. The girl bent down with a dampened towel and sponged off the back of his neck, then tiptoed to the door and motioned Farr. Outside under the shade of a locust he mopped his face and looked at her closely.

"You shouldn't stay here alone."

"Juanita will help me," she said. "I can manage."

Farr smiled a little at that. He wanted to reach out and reassure her, comfort her, for it was all he could do. But she had purposely pushed aside his sympathy. He wondered why a man glib with words on paper could be so inarticulate in dealing with people. As gently as he knew how, he prompted, "That steer your father shot—was it Hatrack beef?"

She nodded. "Their cows kept trampling our crop. Pop asked Mr. Rankin to keep them off, but when it happened next time he got mad and killed one."

"Where were you last night?"

"At Sam Stryker's three miles up the creek. Emma was having her baby." The girl's voice broke and she twisted a handkerchief between her fingers. "When I got home this morning I found him—like that."

"Did he recognize them?"

"It was dark, and they wore masks."

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"Did your neighbors see anything?"

"No." She lifted her face. "But they're pretty worked up."

"I don't blame them," Farr said. "But picking a fight's no way to handle this."

She stood quite still, her gaze intent on his face, then the tight line of her mouth softened at the corners. "It must take a lot to get you mad."

There was no malice in her voice, and he smiled. "Just chuckleheaded, I guess. If anything turns up I'll let you know."

"I had no call to be so sharp with you," she said. "You've been very kind."

Jogging off across the field he turned in the saddle and waved, and she raised a hand. Then he rode over the brow of a rise.

He reined up before the row of new hand-split posts that marked the field's south boundary and got down to inspect the triple strands of wire. They had been cut along the entire length of fence, dangling bright and useless in the powdered soil. Through his anger his mind kept reaching back to the girl, remembering her work-worn hands, because he knew how much sweat and love and faith had gone into the building of such a fence.

Beyond the posts three fresh sets of horsetracks converged and led down the bank of a creek. Farr followed them at a walk. It was a gesture, nothing more, and he wished he had spoken bluntly instead of raising even the slightest hope. Whoever had done this was beyond the reach of any poor dirt farmer. But she had turned to him because there was no one else, and he rode on through the late afternoon with a kind of stubborn indignation.

After several miles the tracks led out of the hills into a pasture and Farr, without particular surprise, recognized the sprawling adobe ranch house under distant cottonwoods. He cut back into the wagon road at a lope then, heading for town and the drink he had been needing ever since he saw Tyce Barker's back.

MOST of Nordyke's regular customers and half a dozen Hatrack riders, in town for payday, were clustered at the bar when Farr came in. He downed his first shot at a gulp and bought a second, glumly eying his reflection in the back mirror. A discussion swirled on around him until presently one voice louder than the rest caught and held his attention.

"Damned stiff-necked nesters."

"Let one get a toehold and they'll take over the valley," another man said.

"First the water, now the fences."

Farr had heard this all before in endless debate, but tonight it held a different meaning for him and he edged into the group. Floyd Rankin, the Hatrack owner, was having his say now and the others nodded agreement, silent and deferential. The cattleman was a broad, thick-chested man, unhurried and positive in manner, with a gruff voice and a trick of emphasizing each point with a jab of his cigar. His glance slid over Farr and he flicked ash to the floor, saying, "It's open range, always has been, no good for crops. This country's built on beef."

"That's right, Floyd," Hugh Nordyke said behind the bar. "Them henyard farmers, they never learn."

"They'll learn," Rankin said. "This has to be settled."

Farr moistened his lips. It was something more than fear, he told himself. He was an editor and an editor's job was to publish the news and take no sides. But a wild recklessness drove him forward into the group and in a voice that sounded shrill to his ears he said, "How?"

Rankin arrested the cigar halfway to his mouth and turned, his bushy eyebrows cocked. "What's that?"

"How will you settle it, Rankin? By flogging the hide off an old man?"

Rankin's eyes narrowed for a second, then he puffed out his cheeks. "Well now, Farr," he said, laughing, "I never took you for a hoeman."

This drew a chuckle from the crowd and Farr flushed. He could still back down, but something in Rankin's laugh, in the man's vast self-confidence, goaded him beyond all caution. Thinly he said, "Where were you last night?"

"What sort of a question is that?"

"I'll answer it. The crew that beat up

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old man Barker rode straight into your home corral."

A quiet spread along the bar to the stud tables in back. Hugh Nordyke set down the glass he had been polishing. Rankin looked at his cigar, stuck it back in his mouth and braced both elbows behind him on the bar. He said, "You can't prove that."

"Can't I?" Farr met his implacable stare. "Read tomorrow's paper if you're interested."

He turned on his heel and crossed the street to his office at a fast walk. He had accomplished nothing, only made an enemy, and for a long while he sat in the darkness before his desk. Then he lit the lamp and started to write. Afterward he put on a green celluloid eyeshade and went to the type case, working with sure, deft fingers.

He was locking up the front page form hours later when footsteps thudded on the walk outside. They filed in, three of them, and closed the door. Farr straightened over the press and came forward slowly to the railing. There was Les Hipple, the Hatrack foreman, and Rankin, two big men looming solid against the shadowed wall. There was, unexpectedly, Sheriff Junius Proctor, solemn and rather shabby-looking in his wrinkled pants and cowhide vest, his eyes level and curious as they fixed calmly on Farr.

Farr turned up the wick and said, "If it's a paper you want you'll have to wait."

PROCTOR sat down in the only chair and crossed his legs. Hipple and Rankin started to speak at once, but the sheriff stilled them both with a sweep of his hand. "How is that farmer?"

"He'll live." Farr let it go at that.

"Don't get me wrong, son," Proctor said. "The only reason I'm here is to head off more trouble."

"To get me to kill that story, Sheriff?"

"That's up to you. But I hope you won't try Barker's case in your newspaper."

Farr smiled. "Where else would it be tried? Not in any court in this county."

"That's not your worry, or mine," Proctor went on imperturbably, "but the public good is."

"Meaning Hatrack?"

"Meaning what I said. Hatrack and the farmers are a standoff now, even-Steven. Maybe they'll have sense enough to reach some agreement. But you blow this up in the paper and we'll have a range war on our hands sure."

"Speaking for yourself, of course?" Farr said.

"I'm my own man." Proctor watched him evenly, no expression in his faded eyes. "I figured you might be too. Between us maybe we can patch up a truce."

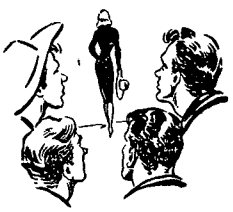
"A little late for that, Proctor."

Proctor stood up. "Goodnight then." He looked at Rankin. "Anything more you got to say?"

The rancher exchanged a look with Hip-

Counter Attack

By LIMERICK LUKE



This cowgal from Pendleton, Ore.,
Was not of the kind men ignore.
All the cowpokes who knewed her
Sparked, courted and wooed her—
But she married the clerk in a store!

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ple. "I think we'll wait for that paper to come out."

The sheriff nodded at Farr and moved out through the door at his unhurried pace. Farr listened to the receding slap of his steps along the walk and looked at Rankin. The rancher touched a match to the cigar between his teeth, never shifting his gaze from Farr's face.

"You want to make a deal, is that it?" he said meagerly.

Farr waited, a faint smile of contempt on his mouth.

"What's your price, Farr?"

"You could start by rewiring Barker's fence."

Rankin snorted. "Fifty dollars?"

"And after that keep your cows off the Bench."

Hipple eased his bulk off the wall but Rankin caught his arm. "A hundred's as high as I'll go," he said. "That's not bad for a tramp printer."

"Too good if you ask me," Hipple put in. "He's trying to hold you up, Floyd."

"A hundred dollars," Farr murmured, "to keep my mouth shut."

Rankin fished a wallet from inside his coat.

"Get out," Farr said.

For long seconds the rancher did not move. Carefully then he tucked the wallet back inside his coat before he raised his head to look at Farr. "That was stupid," he said. "I don't like you, Farr, and I don't like that lying rag you call a newspaper. Up to a point I'm reasonable, but I won't stand for blackmail."

He took a step forward, his eyes small and wicked. "There's no room for troublemakers in this town."

"Then maybe you'd better move," Farr said quietly, "because those farmers are here to stay."

Rankin hit him in the face with his fist. Farr staggered back and tripped over the chair and Hipple clipped him from behind. He sagged to his knees and Rankin brought up a boot to his ribs and he slid down, grabbing at Rankin's legs. Then a blow behind the ear sent him into a black spinning void.

LONG AFTER daybreak he opened his eyes. He pulled himself up on the railing, holding in the nausea that wrenched him, and blinked around at the wreckage of his office. The type cases had been upended, the press was tipped over on one side and his paper stock was a soggy ink-soaked pulp. Farr wiped a sleeve across his swollen face and pitched forward onto the floor again. That was how Addison Barker found him.

She propped him up in the chair, brought water and washed the crusted blood from his face. Presently Farr came round and got unsteadily to his feet. Wide-eyed and grave, she said, "I'll get the doctor."

He shook his head, got a pint bottle from his desk, uncorked it with his teeth and took a long straight pull. The girl watched him and didn't say a word and Farr was grateful for that.

She helped him on with his coat and he thanked her through bruised and puffy lips, and then she came in front of him and said huskily, "This happened because of the reward notice?"

"Not all of it."

The girl looked down at the scattered type on the floor and suddenly began to cry. She made no sound but the tears rolled down her cheeks and Farr gave her arm an awkward pat. "Don't feel too bad," he said. "It wasn't much of a paper."

"That's not true."

"True enough. And I'm not much of an editor. I found that out last night." Glancing away, he saw a bulging sugar sack on his desk, tied around the top with a piece of twine. "What's that?" he said.

"The reward money. The people out on the Bench took up a collection. That's why I came."

Farr grimaced, thinking of the cut fence, the crude barren shacks he had seen along Squaw Creek the day before. "There won't be any reward."

"Please." Timidly she put her hand over his. "It's for you. To keep. Because you tried to help us."

Farr looked down at her, proud and shy and diffident, but strangely moved too. In his kindest tone he said, "Thank your

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neighbors for me. But I can't take their money."

"Why not?" Her grip tightened on his fingers. "You've got to fight back now."

He had made no conscious decision and he hesitated, debating how to frame an explanation she would understand. That was the important thing, to explain to her how he had failed here; why he had compromised to get along with everyone, trying to be impartial and fair. But even to him it sounded lame and false.

Then, over her shoulder, he saw Les Hipple push through the doors of the Palace and saunter in the direction of the jail. Releasing her hand, he swung around to the desk, got his gun from a drawer and rammed it down in his waistband.

She brought a hand up to her throat. "Half the Hatrack crew is still in town sleeping off payday," she said. "You'd better get Sam Stryker and some of the other men from the Bench."

"That's just what I don't want," Farr said. Pausing with a hand on the doorknob, he turned. "Will you wait—till I get back?"

She nodded and he saw her effort at a smile. Holding himself tight against the flaring pain in his side, he pushed outside onto the walk. She called his name but Farr moved upstreet through the early morning quiet without slowing his stride, past the curious stares of two drummers who stood on the hotel porch.

CLIMBING the jail steps, Farr turned into the sheriff's office. Junius Proctor, his nose buried in a sheaf of Wanted dodgers, peered up at Farr's face with a start and wheeled around in his swivel chair.

Farr leaned his knuckles on the desk. "You won your point. I'm not printing that story."

Proctor continued to stare at his face with frowning gravity. "I hoped they wouldn't do that," he said heavily. "Believe me, I'm sorry."

"That little conference was your idea."

"My idea, yes, but for a reason that's still good," Proctor said. "I'd never beat a man to make him change his mind."

"It won't happen again, Proctor."

The sheriff let out something that sounded like a sigh. "It takes more than talk to make an editor, son."

Farr compressed his lips. Much as he needed the sheriff to side him, he could not and would not ask for help. Stiffly he said, "All I want to know is where you stand."

"Square in the middle," Proctor said. "The question is, where do you stand?"

"I'll show you," Farr said. "In about two minutes."

He turned to the door but Proctor called, "Farr—"

Over his shoulder Farr glanced back, seeing Proctor's face break into a near smile.

"Before I back a man," the sheriff said, "I've got to be sure he is a man."

Farr went down the steps two at a time as Les Hipple came around the corner. The Hatrack foreman spread his feet wide, his face wary, braced for trouble. "You think over that proposition, Farr," he said.

Farr came to a full stop. "You and Rankin think over mine?"

"Maybe you'd like some more of the same," Hipple said.

Farr shouldered past him and went down the walk. The two drummers watched his progress with more than curiosity now, and across the street he saw the girl in front of his shop. When he turned into the Palace, Hugh Nordyke rose from a stool behind his bar and Farr saw Rankin alone at a table at the far end of the deserted saloon. The rancher had a beer before him, absorbed in a three-day-old copy of the *Pacosa Journal.*

Farr came up before him soundlessly and stood swaying on his feet, fighting off the dizziness. When his vision cleared he said softly, "Rankin."

The rancher looked up into the muzzle of Farr's gun, and his face turned a dull red.

"Put down your paper," Farr said. "And come outside."

Rankin's mouth opened and the expression in his eyes was as ugly and unguarded as it ever would be.

Farr cocked his hammer. "Outside."

Rankin got up, not quite so deliberate now, sloshing his beer over the table top,

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and moved the length of the saloon at Farr's prodding. Stepping out onto the walk he stopped to look at Farr again, all the assurance gone from his face and his lips trembling with pale fury.

Farr tossed his gun out into the street. "Rankin," he said, "you know how a bull whip feels?"

Rankin lunged at him in a savage rush and landed a stinging blow against the temple. Farr fell and got up groggily, and Rankin smashed him in the face. Farr staggered back against the wall, the wind slamming out of him, and sidestepped Rankin's fast fist. He chopped the rancher twice in the stomach, forcing him back, then stepped forward and caught him with a right on the hinge of the jaw.

Rankin went down to his knees and Farr hauled him up by the shirt front and hit him again. The rancher's hat sailed off and he teetered back against an awning support and fell heavily between the walk and tie-rack. Farr looked down at his limp figure in the dusty street, then over at the blur of the girl's face. Beside her was Junius Proctor, leaning back against the office front.

FARR managed to pick up his gun without falling, and turned just as Les Hipple hurried out of the hotel, trailed by four touseled Hatrack riders. The foreman pulled up in the middle of the street, his glance shuttling to Rankin and then to Farr, but finally settling on the sheriff. Two of the punchers got Rankin by the arms and hoisted him to his feet.

Les Hipple, one hand on his holster, said thickly, "You in this, Proctor?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Ask Farr."

Farr swallowed hard. "I made you an offer last night, Rankin. A new fence and no more cows on the Bench. That hundred of yours will just about cover damages."

Rankin shook off his two men and moved up beside Hipple. Ignoring Farr, he spat out some blood and said to Proctor, "I helped elect you sheriff. Don't forget it."

Proctor came erect off the wall, a rumpled, dowdy little man, but as he moved to the edge of the walk a dangerous glint of temper showed in his eyes. "So did a lot of people, Floyd," he said. "Including farmers. That's your answer."

Rankin scowled at him, but his glance wavered away and after a long pause he bent down to pick up his hat. Hipple watched him uncertainly and dropped his hand. The four Hatrack riders, sullen and sleepy-eyed, stood motionless. Then Rankin said dourly, "All right, Farr. It's a deal."

Rankin gave him one last speculative look and tramped back into the Palace. Farr watched Hipple and the others disappear through the doors behind him, not quite believing this was finished. He turned to thank Proctor, but the sheriff was already inside the office.

Farr limped through the door and leaned against the desk, too spent and shaky to speak, while the girl eyed him across the railing. She had not spoken once, nor allowed herself any sign of fear. It struck him that she had a rare quality of awareness, accepting a man for what he was instead of judging him by what he ought to be. He gave her a sober smile. She answered it with her quiet knowing look and they were staring at each other like that when Proctor, poking among the ruins of the shop, coughed loudly.

Farr grinned and said, "You call that a truce?"

"Hardly." The sheriff's mouth quirked. "But Rankin'll keep his word, now he's got it through his mule head he can't swing the world by the tail."

"You lost some votes today, Proctor."

"I reckon you lost some readers too." Proctor paused at the door. "And son, when you're not too busy, put me down for a year's subscription to the *Independent*."

Tipping his hat, the sheriff was gone. Farr's mouth began to lift in a full smile. He looked at the chipped gilt lettering on his window, ablaze in the morning sun, and he looked down at the girl, standing still and close and smiling beside him. He might never be the *New York Herald*, but he'd be the best editor in Carrizo County.

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Killer of the Mountains

The Friendly Curious Deadly Mountain Lion!

THIS MARAUDER of the forest should have been a charter member of Murder, Incorporated. Scattered numerously through the mountains from Texas to Montana, and from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, during the days of the trappers and the early cattle era, the mountain lion killed deer, cattle, and smaller animals with abandon.

No reliable record can be found that a mountain lion, puma, cougar, jaguar, or panther, as he is sometimes called, ever attacked a human being unless cornered or suffering from hydrophobia. But there

a true story by **Ben B. Sampselle**

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were times when this huge member of the cat family made the hair of a trapper or mountain man stand on end under his coonskin cap.

Occasionally a trapper felt a creeping sensation on his spine and turned about suddenly to see a mountain lion stalking him. Or at night over his small campfire he saw the reflection of the big cat's eyes burning through the darkness. The lion was satisfying his curiosity or showing a desire to be friendly. Both theories are supported by old-time woodsmen. He is extremely curious and investigates a great many trivial things.

But for all his curiosity the mountain lion usually keeps out of sight of humans. His wariness causes him to make many detours to stay hidden. He is so adept at this that much of his character must be deduced from his tracks.

The mature male mountain lion is a 100- to 160-pound package of agile, lightning-striking strength. A sinuous grace marks every move of his slender four-foot body. His black-tipped tail, three feet long, appears to be of little use except to give vent to anger, threshing back and forth when he is displeased. His tawny coloring, except for a white chin, throat and underbelly, doesn't blend so well with his usual background as the pelage of other forest animals. The short and massive head of this predator, and his heavy forelegs picture a brutal force. The female, no less a killer than the male, weighs from 75 to 100 pounds.

The mountain lion stalked through the Western cattle country, and no steer was too large for him to attack. Cowboys took a day off from their regular chores to hunt him down, especially in winter when fresh tracks were found in the snow. He had to be kept from striking again.

Bob Mayfield, a cowpoke for the X Cross X in the Texas Panhandle, put his rope on a mountain lion, and lived to tell about it. In fact Mayfield, who worked at one time for the doughty John Slaughter's Lazy S in the Palo Duro Canyon, and twice went up the trail from Texas to Montana with a herd of longhorns, is still living, hale and hearty, in California.

LATE ONE AFTERNOON in the fall of '92, Mayfield was riding in from the range through Sourdough Canyon. Reaching a narrow spot in the rock-strewn sides of the defile, Mayfield hauled up short at the sight of a mountain lion, a tawny flash in the dimming light, leaping from the buckbrush to the top of a gray boulder.

Mayfield is not certain to this day why he decided to use his rope rather than hightail it down the canyon away from the lion, which he distinctly remembers had a mean and hungry look. With a spine-chilling growl the lion reared as Mayfield's rope sliced toward him, and slashed at it with one of his deadly paws.

This act probably saved Mayfield's life. The quick-tempered beast was off balance when the rope settled around his neck. Mayfield raked his horse with both spurs, and gave the lion a wild ride over the rock-studded floor of the draw at the end of his rope. What was left of the hide, seven and one-half feet from nose to the tip of the tail, was hung on the side of the bunkhouse. The feat brought Mayfield a lot of notoriety, but with a backward glance and a shaking of his head, he says it was a foolish way to become a hero.

Mayfield's lion may have been measured accurately, but the size and weight of mountain lions has been exaggerated as much as that of grizzly bears. Often no measuring device or scales were available before a lion or bear was shucked from his hide, and many a long measurement was publicized. The pelt of a lion or bear will stretch two or more feet after removal from the carcass.

Trappers and mountain men in the early West caught glimpses of mountain lions from the seacoast to altitudes of 6,500 feet in the mountains, and occasionally as high as 11,000 feet. The higher altitude records were noted in late summer when the lions were most footloose. The wanderers were males. Commonly the lioness and her kittens remained much in the same territory throughout the year.

This demon of the forest has no specific mating season. Young kittens have been captured during every month of the year. According to evidence gathered by a num-

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ber of hunters, the pairs do not mate for life. Most of the information gathered leans toward the contrary.

The lioness gives birth to from two to four kittens in the normal litter. At birth they are much like domestic kittens, furred, closed eyes, and small. The kittens are weaned when about six weeks of age, but sometimes remain and hunt with the mother until more than a year old. Commonly, however, they strike out for themselves at a lesser age. Kittens taken captive before being weaned were introduced to cow's milk by pushing a paw into a pan of milk, which the kittens licked off. After the first trial they started lapping milk from a pan. Kittens are seldom taken from the den by the mother to visit the game she has killed until they are two months old. At this age they weigh from six to eight pounds.

ALONG with his cunning the mountain lion has unlimited patience. He will detour for a mile over a boulder-strewn ridge to keep his scent upwind from his quarry, or double back a like distance, from one boulder to another, taking advantage of every available sprig of cover He will lie patiently for an entire day watching an intended victim, if he cannot by wary maneuver put himself within striking distance.

He seldom attempts to capture his prey by running it down, as the wolf does His favorite hunting maneuver is to crouch on the limb of a tree or ledge. Cunningly concealed, he waits for a deer or a flock of mountain sheep to pass. He springs upon his victim with a lightning-like leap, felling it with a blow of his powerful paw or by sheer weight.

Winter is the easy hunting season for the lion. When the snow becomes deep and crusted in the mountains, deer and bighorn sheep, with their small, sharp-pointed hoofs, break through and flounder about. The lion with his large and spreading feet travels easily and swiftly over the drifts and catches his prey with little effort.

Deer meat is the favorite food of the mountain lion, and his range coincides with that of the mule or white-tailed deer, shifting his hunting ground with the seasonal migration of the deer. He is fond of veal, too, and is capable of taking a hundred-pound calf over a high fence.

He has a liking for beaver meat, too. During winter in the beaver country, beavers try to keep an opening free of ice at the lower end of the pond, as an exit to sun themselves or gather food. A lion will lie patiently for hours at this opening, waiting for the eager beaver to poke his nose above the ice. When he does, a rake of the lion's sharp-clawed paw snatches his victim into the open before the beaver can regret his foolishness of not staying in his mud-daubed hut.

When alarmed suddenly the mountain lion drops down, belly-flat, and creeps forward under all obtainable cover, to have a look. His cunning is at its best when hunted. He lopes past a ledge, then swiftly backtracks. He leaps up, circles close to his former trail, then heads off in another direction. Such a maneuver confuses a pack of hunting dogs, delaying them as much as half an hour before they can pick up the trail again.

Jim Bridger, trapper, mountainman, and guide, told many a tall tale about the wonders of the unexplored West, and particularly about the region known as Colter's Hell, known later as Yellowstone National Park. A hair-raiser is credited to Bridger regarding his escape from a pair of hungry mountain lions.

During one of Bridger's treks through Colter's Hell, in the dead of winter, with snow twenty feet deep in spots, the mountain man killed a deer and started toward the cave where he expected to skin the deer and prepare a part of it for his supper. He had gone only a little way when he saw that a pair of hungry mountain lions were sniffing along his trail.

A short distance ahead of Bridger was a stream, one which he knew well, and according to the old trapper flowed so swiftly over its rocky bed that the lower water boiled. He reached the stream just a jump ahead of the lions, and dived in.

Bridger weighted the deer with a small boulder on the bottom of the creek and

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swam into the underwater tunnel of a beaver's lodge. The passageway was dark and narrow, but he managed to crawl up to the small hut. Through a chink in the lodge he saw the two frustrated lions pace up and down the stream, eying the deer which they could not reach, and showing their anger in blood-chilling growls.

BRIDGER shivered and sweated by turns, watching the hungry lions only an arm's-length away. Finally, after the longest hour of the old trapper's life, the lions gave up and trotted off.

The shivering mountain man crawled back through the tunnel and retrieved his deer, cooked to a turn by the hot water. One of the tenderfeet to whom the story was told, wanted to know how he survived in the boiling water. Bridger said, "Friend, the water was boiling only on the bottom. From there up it was so durn cold the only fish that could live in it was a fur-bearing trout." It is reported that Bridger told such whoppers to express his scorn for the tenderfeet who annoyed him by scoffing at the true wonders he had seen in the unexplored West.

The grizzly bear, which nosed into a lot of Western history, is the only forest dweller that has no fear of the mountain lion. The lion seems to know this as well as the grizzly, and gives the big fellow a wide field except if the bear tries to appropriate his meal. The enraged lion then loses his caution, and attacks the huge beast—to his sorrow. The bear steps nimbly aside and deals his attacker a savage blow with a paw even more powerful than that of the lion. The lion is knocked sprawling into the brush. If he is foolish enough to try it again, the performance turns out about the same as before.

Cattlemen and sheepmen have sometimes reported that a pack of lions attacked their cattle or sheep. This, however, was deduced from the number of animals slain. Hunters who have observed the conduct of mountain lions over a long period of time contend that the lions never hunt in packs like wolves, wild dogs, and coyotes. They point out that the lion belongs to the feline family, and felines roam alone, unless a male and female hunt together as a family pair. However, the mountain lion, according to these same hunters, shows no aversion to getting wet, as do others of the cat family, but will swim a stream as quickly as any member of the dog tribe.

Mountain lions ran a close second to wolves as a destroyer of cattle in the early West, though not so numerous. Many a cowboy has asserted that he could hear the savage screams of the cougars, a hair-raising sound if he ever heard one. Then a heated argument crops up. Amateur woodsmen and hunters swear that the mountain lion shrieks like a woman and cries like a baby at night.

Jay Bruce, for many years a professional hunter of the varmints in California, who killed upward of 500 of the predators, contended that the blood-chilling screams of the mountain lion is a fable. Bruce's contention is supported by a Montana hunter who possessed a record for killing the big cats almost equal to the Californian's.

The two hunters had first-hand knowledge of only three sounds made by the lion; a low hiss, a throaty growl, and a whistling noise. The hiss and the growl were usually directed at dogs when the lion had been wounded or treed. Bruce's prowess in killing cougars became something of a legend in the mountains. It was confidently asserted that he would not hesitate to go into a lion's den after one.

A group of hunters who heard the supposed screams of a mountain lion one night, set out to track down the beast. Directed by the weird sounds, they came to a large fir. The hunters found two wildcats perched in the tree, a male and female. The screams had been the mating song of the wildcats.

The savage mountain lion, cougar, or panther, has his moments of playfulness as he stalks through the forest. An old trapper watched a lion accost a porcupine in a clearing. He leaped over the porcupine and back again, then dashed in circles around it like a playful kitten, making a number of feints at the porcupine with a paw. But he was careful not to come into actual contact with the needle-like quills

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of the clumsy rodent. More than likely, when he was a cub the lion had had the painful experience of direct contact with the bristling armor of a porcupine. Presently the lion tired of the play and went on along the ridge.

The mountain lion still prowls the Rockies, the Sierras, and other Western mountain ranges, but in steadily diminishing numbers. Civilization and the hunter's gun and dogs have driven him farther into the back country.

Likely not one of a thousand mountain vacationers will ever get a glimpse of our largest member of the cat family. The sizable bounty set on his scalp by a number of state governments permitted hunters in years past to make good wages tracking down the wily, sharp-clawed killer. The bounties ran as high as twenty dollars for males and thirty dollars for females. With every cattleman eager to aid the professional hunter, the marauder had to take to the backwoods to save his hide.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. "This world is all a bubble. There is nothing here but woe, hardship, toil and trouble!" These are reputed to be the last words of what outlaw hanged at Round Rock, Texas, July 21, 1878?

2. How much of a swimming horse usually shows above the water?

3. What frontier fort near Las Vegas, N.M., now in ruins but soon to become a National Monument, was once the principal supply depot for the U.S. Army in the Southwest?

4. The principal scenic attraction in Utah's Zion National Park is which of the following: (a) a magnificent gorge, (b) big timber, (c) volcanic craters, (d) geysers, (e) cliff dwellings?

5. Stephen Payne, ex-cowboy and writer of many authentic Western stories for RANCH ROMANCES lives in "The Mile High City." You name it and the state of which it is the capital.

6. Were Texas trail herds ever driven to markets farther east than Kansas?

7. Is the hornéd (most cowboys say "horny") toad (a) a poisonous reptile, (b) a nonpoisonous reptile, or (c) a mammal?

8. On Tres Palacios Creek there is the statue of a pioneer cattleman and trail driver who had a strange nickname and who was said to have "the biggest voice in Texas." Who was he?

9. Old-time cowboys sometimes tied a bad bronc's tail to a burro. For what purpose?

10. What two far Western states, one in particular, are often called "The Evergreen Country"?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 82. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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Size .44

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

JEFF HALE RODE into the fierce little town of Ruxton from the north, on a battered gray horse. He was a tall man slumped forward in the saddle; blood dripping from the tip of his chin to the top of the saddlehorn.

Ruxton was a town that had four saloons, a blacksmith shop, a saddle shop, and about ten houses. It was all weather-beaten, but the weather, instead of softening it, only made it more raw. It was a heathenish little town that had started up

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One glance told the girl this man was badly hurt

SIZE DOESN'T have much to do with the way things turn out. Take two cowards with big guns, for instance, faced with a tiny gal

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in this land of mountains and barren mesas, thinking that because two trails crossed here, it would one day become a city. It had missed this destiny. A railroad had passed to the south. With the coming of the railroad, Ruxton had lost all chance of ever becoming a city, or even a town, and had sunk into stupor and lethargy, prepared to rot to death. Even the discovery of the Red Dog Mine to the north had not brought traffic and life to Ruxton. The mine traffic had found a shorter, easier way to the railroad and had missed Ruxton. Where there was no traffic, there could be no town. True, the old trails on which Ruxton had once based its hopes still fed it, but now the chief freight they carried was wanted men two jumps ahead of a deputy sheriff.

Ruxton made a precarious living serving the needs of the outlaws who came in after sundown and stayed out of sight during the day, vanishing into the mountains. The people who lived in Ruxton shared one common characteristic: each one attended strictly to his own business. If a gun went off to the south, every inhabitant in Ruxton looked toward the north.

Slumped forward in the saddle, holding onto the saddlehorn where his own blood dripped, Jeff Hale peered through half-closed eyelids at the place where his horse had led him. Hours before, he had given up attempting to guide his horse. The houses he saw along the sides of the sandy, dusty street seemed to move up and down in an undulating movement similar to a mirage seen on the desert. Was this town a mirage? Fascinated, he watched the houses lift and fall.

He had never been here before; his duties kept him to the north of this place, but he knew the name of this town and its reputation. At the thought, the houses stopped dancing and settled down beside the sandy street, and he saw the place as it was. It was indeed a hole in hell. That much was right. It was also no place for him in this moment. Not if he loved life!

He pulled at the reins of the horse. The tired animal had almost forgotten what a pull on the reins felt like. It lurched heavily at the tug.

The lurch took the last remaining fragment of Jeff Hale's strength. He felt himself falling, trying to close his grip around the saddlehorn. His fingers slipped in his own blood. He fell face downward in the sandy street, and did not move.

THE SON-OF-A-GUN fell off his horse!" Fat Rariden gasped. Rariden had been watching the street through the hole in the wall of the saloon, which had been made by a charge of buckshot fired in the old days. The men inside the saloon who had reason to want to know what was going on outside without being observed themselves found this hole to their advantage.

Fat Rariden had thick, stumpy legs that seemed always about to burst from his levis. His jaws sagged like the jowls of a hog and his little eyes seemed lost in folds of flesh. He liked to describe himself as a man's man. Certainly he was not a woman's man; no woman in her right mind would pay any attention to him.

An oily cartridge belt crossed his thick waist, almost losing itself in the rolls of fat there. He had drawn his Colt .45 the instant he had realized that the man on the horse was Jeff Hale.

"Jeff Hale fell off his horse?" Ed Frommer questioned. His tone indicated that he did not believe it. Frommer glared at Fat Rariden. "You damned fool, you're drunk again. Get away from that knothole." Frommer was clean-shaven and well dressed, and was wearing a coat which concealed the gun in the shoulder holster.

"I tell you, Ed, he fell off," Fat Rariden insisted. "If you don't believe me, look for yourself." Rariden moved away from the hole. He slid the Colt back into its holster. It wouldn't be needed now, he thought.

Frommer took a hasty look around the room, a precaution he always took before he turned his back, and applied his eye to the hole. He took one look, then straightened up. "By thunder, he did fall off his horse. He's lying in the street."

"Let's go get him," Fat said, pulling his gun again and starting toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Frommer said. "He

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might have faked this fall just to lure us out into the open. He might be lying in the dust with his hand on his gun, playing possum to tempt us out."

Under his whiskers, Fat Rariden turned pale. "Heck, even Jeff Hale wouldn't take a chance like that. We could plug him where he lies."

"And take a chance on having somebody see us do it?" Frommer said. "He knows we wouldn't plug him where anybody could see us do it. He's trying to draw us out to make certain he's really knocked silly. Then he'll turn loose on us."

A nerve twitched in Frommer's cheek as he spoke. He made a ducking motion with his head and the tic disappeared.

"Let me look," Rariden said. He applied his eye to the hole, then quickly glanced up at Frommer, a look of triumph on his face. "I was right all along. He's out cold. There's a woman bending over him now, trying to get him to come to. He ain't doing it."

"A woman, you say?" Frommer looked through the hole. "By thunder, there is. He's out, all right." A grin appeared on his face. "In that case, we'll just walk out there and see what has happened. When we discover it's our old friend, Jeff Hale, who fell off his horse and maybe hurt himself pretty bad, why naturally we'll take care of our old friend until he gets well." He glanced at the owner of the saloon, who had not moved from behind the bar. "You got a back room, Harry?"

The owner nodded toward the rear. "Yeah. Two dollars, it'll cost you."

"We'll take it."

"In advance," the owner said.

Frommer grudgingly laid two silver dollars on the bar. They vanished into the till.

"How do you figure Jeff being here, Ed?" Fat Rariden questioned.

"It's simple. As soon as he discovered the paymaster had been held up, he saw his chance to head south with the payroll. Probably he never recognized the two men who tried to jump him. He'll sure be surprised when he discovers he's run straight into them here in Ruxton."

Making certain his gun was loose in the shoulder holster, Frommer walked out of the saloon. Fat Rariden followed him. Both had grins on their faces as they went out the door.

Seeing the man lying on the street and the girl on her knees beside him, both men seemed greatly surprised.

"Look, Ed, there's been an accident," Fat Rariden said, loudly.

"Yeah. We had better go see about it," Frommer answered.

They both grinned as they walked toward Jeff Hale, lying face down in the sandy street of Ruxton.

THALIA CORDEN had been on her way to the store. She had a market basket under her arm, and she was humming a little tune to herself. The dress she wore was a nuisance, but she was wearing it out of deference to her father, who thought it was high time she quit wearing levis and cowboy boots and started dressing like the young woman she now was.

Her father, deft with his hands, made saddles, harnesses, boots, and anything else that could be made of leather. He had settled in Ruxton two years previously, not by choice but because he had a long-legged fifteen-year-old girl on his hands, and he had had to work here until he could accumulate enough money to move to a better place. That day had not arrived. There was plenty of leather work, but payment was not as plentiful as the work. No one could refuse to mend a saddle for a man just because he couldn't afford to pay for it.

Thalia saw the young man all bent over in the saddle of his tired horse. Another drunken cowboy, she supposed. Then, startled, she recognized him.

"Jeff!" she whispered to herself. "Jeff Hale—in Ruxton! It can't be true."

Three years earlier, before she had moved to Ruxton, when she had spent all her days in levis and had not had to wear dresses at all, there had been a young man and she had tried to be near him all the time. He had hardly seemed to notice the skinny girl

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in levis, which had dismayed her; but when he noticed her, he had been nice. He hadn't teased her, but had treated her as a friend, almost as an equal. She had discussed the intricacies of saddles and horses with him and she had also fallen head over heels in love with him. Then he had gone away. He hadn't come back, and she hadn't dared hope to see him again.

Now she ran into the street and dropped to her knees beside him. One glance at him told her that he hadn't fallen because he was drunk but because he was wounded. A bullet had gouged a groove along the side of his head, leaving raw bleeding scalp behind it and exposing a streak of bone.

Jeff made a little sound deep in his throat and tried to move, twisting himself on one hand. The effort was too great for him. The groan ended in a gasp and he sank back to the ground.

She knew he had to have care immediately. The wound had to be cleaned and bandaged and he had to be put to bed. There was a spare bedroom in her house. She would get her father to carry Jeff there. There was no doctor in Ruxton, but if she took care of him, Jeff wouldn't need a doctor.

"Don't worry, Jeff. I'll take you to my house. You'll be all right. I'll take good care—" She broke off as she realized two men were approaching. Their footsteps were loud, their voices louder. She looked around.

She didn't know them. She didn't need to know them to know what they were. She had seen their breed of coyote in Ruxton too often to fail to recognize them instantly for what they were. Intuitively, she sensed their intentions.

She stifled the scream that rose automatically in her throat. She knew that this was no time to scream, that Jeff's life and maybe her life too might depend on whether or not she kept silent, and that both might depend on what she said or did not say during the next few moments.

"Is this man a friend of yours, miss?" Ed Frommer said. His eyes were on her, searching and probing.

"I never saw him before in my life," Thalia answered promptly. "Some drunk, I thought at first. But then I noticed he was wounded."

"If you never saw him before, why did you get your dress all mussed up by kneeling beside him?" Frommer continued.

"Why—" A touch of panic shot through her. "He's hurt. I dropped down to get a better look. Also—" She blushed. "Generally, I wear levis instead of a dress. I dropped to my knees before I noticed what I was doing." She rose quickly and brushed sand and dust from her dress.

Frommer's eyes went past her, dismissing her. His gaze settled on the ground. "This fellow is a friend of ours," he said. "We'll take care of him."

"Yeah, poor old Jeff," Fat Rariden spoke, grinning. "He got himself shot in the head. But we'll take care of him. We'll look out for our old pal, won't we, Ed?"

"Sure," Frommer answered. He bent, took hold of Jeff's legs.

Turmoil rose in Thalia Corden. These men seemd to know Jeff, they seemed to regard him as a friend. Obviously, they were outlaws. Was Jeff an outlaw too? When he had ridden off to see what was on the other side of that mountain had he ridden the outlaw trail?

The horse lifted its drooping head and looked after its master. It made a snuffling sound in its nose. Thalia saw the horse without quite realizing she was seeing it. She watched the two men carry Jeff into the Star Saloon. Then she went back home. As soon as she was around the corner and out of sight, she lifted her skirts and began to run. Let anybody see her legs who had the chance, she was in too big a hurry to care about such things.

Her trip to the store was forgotten. The market basket lay in the street where she had dropped it.

JEFF HALE'S first dazed impression was that the houses had stopped dancing and had begun to move in an undulating motion instead. Dimly he realized he was being carried. He tried to open his eyes. They were filled with dust and sand, and even after he got them open he couldn't

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Ed Frommer slugged Jeff in the mouth

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see who they were. They threw him on a bunk and he sat up and began to pry the sand and the dust out of his eyes.

A voice said, "That's a nasty wound you've got on the side of your head, Jeff."

The voice was vaguely familiar; it sounded consoling and friendly but there was an undertone of amusement in it, as if the speaker were chuckling to himself over some private joke.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "That damned Fat Rariden almost got me."

"Too bad!" the voice said.

Jeff got enough sand out of his eyes, and discovered he was looking straight into the grinning face of Fat Rariden. Shock shot through him. Behind Rariden were the somber features of Ed Frommer.

Jeff wished he could swallow his tongue. Not that it would make much difference if he did. What he said didn't matter now.

"Why, hello, Fat," he said. His hand moved lightning fast for his gun. It came away empty when his fingers closed over an empty holster.

Fat chuckled, winking at Frommer. "He's reaching for his gun."

"So he is," Frommer agreed. "I wonder what he wants his gun for?"

"Danged if I know," Fat answered. "He surely wouldn't be wanting to shoot a couple of innocent citizens like us, would he?"

"Of course not," Ed Frommer answered.

"Not while I haven't got a gun," Jeff said.

"Plenty of shells but no gun," Fat Rariden said. He looked at Frommer and winked again. "Bitter, ain't he?"

Frommer moved around Rariden. "Naw," Frommer said. "Naw. He ain't bitter; he ain't half as bitter as he's going to be." He slugged Jeff Hale in the mouth.

"Where is it?" Frommer said, as the blow struck.

Jeff Hale was knocked against the wall of the room. He pulled himself slowly to a sitting position! Blood was in his mouth and the room was spinning.

"Where is what?" he said.

"The payroll of the Red Dog Mine," Frommer answered. "You know damned well what I mean."

Jeff very carefully adjusted himself in his sitting position. He stared at Frommer and at Fat Rariden. The man was making no sense whatsoever.

"You know what I mean," Frommer repeated.

"Okay, I know what you mean," Jeff answered. He spat blood on the floor. "But I don't know where the payroll is. Up until this moment, I thought you and Fat had it."

Again the fist struck him. This time Jeff knew it was coming and he was prepared to go with it. The blow hurt, but it did not jar him too much.

"The paymaster was dead when I got to him," he said. "You and Fat had just killed him. I thought you two had taken the payroll from his saddlebags."

"He didn't have the payroll in his saddlebags!" Frommer shouted, enraged.

"The hell he didn't!" Jeff answered. "He got it from the bank. I rode guard behind him, keeping a half mile behind so I could catch up quick in case of trouble." Sudden anger blazed up in him. "By hell, if you two are implying that he ditched the payroll on the way, intending to come back and get it later—" He stopped speaking. The flaw in that argument was obvious to him. He didn't need Frommer's head shake to know that the man was thinking of something else. A chill rose up in him as he guessed what was in the man's mind.

"You and him were in cahoots!" Ed Frommer said. "We think he ditched the payroll along the road. Then you and him had planned to fake a holdup. Only you both got fooled because you run into a real holdup!"

Jeff saw only too clearly the spot he was in. He didn't know what to say.

THE NEWS that the payroll hadn't been in Sam Kilson's saddlebags jarred him. He remembered that the paymaster had been worried about a holdup but he still had the payroll for the Red Dog Mine. If the paymaster had had the payroll, Frommer and Rariden would have gotten

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it, in which case they wouldn't be trying to beat out of him information about it.

"Sam Kilson didn't have it," Frommer repeated. "We had time to search him before you came charging up and run into one of Fat's slugs."

"My horse got scared of the shots and bolted with me," Jeff replied. "I lost a lot of blood and got weak so I gave him his head. He brought me here."

"Right to us," Fat Rariden said. "I'll have to make certain that plug gets an extra fork of hay."

"You're lucky to have a smart horse like that," Frommer said. "He might have wandered off in the desert with you and you might have died."

Jeff Hale grunted, then was silent. He had his own opinion about how lucky he had been, and how lucky he still was. Pain moved along the gash in his head where the bullet had gone. He looked intently at Fat Rariden.

"You look like you're measuring me for a shroud," Fat said.

"I am. But I'm hoping a rope comes first," Jeff answered.

"I'm not kidding when I say I want to know what became of that Red Dog payroll," Frommer said.

Jeff twisted on the bunk and his hand fumbled again at the empty holster. Even if they decided he didn't know where the payroll was, they would kill him to get rid of a witness to the murder of the Red Dog paymaster. He was alive right now only because they thought he was lying. As long as they thought he was lying, he had enough value to them to be kept alive.

"If you'll throw in with us and tell us where the payroll is hidden, we'll split it three ways," Frommer continued.

"Nice of you to be so generous," Jeff said.

"You know where it is." An ominous tone appeared in Frommer's voice.

"That may be," Jeff answered. "But I've heard it said that dead men don't talk."

"That's right," Frommer answered. "But sometimes men talk just before they die."

"Do you suppose you can beat the information out of me?" Jeff asked.

"We can try," Frommer answered.

Jeff had no clear picture of what happened after that. He rolled himself into a ball on the rough bunk. Fists pounded all over him. It was his impression that from time to time Fat Rariden used a club on him. He lay there, taking the punishment, too near dead to care what they did to him.

Eventually he passed out.

WHEN HE CAME groggily back to consciousness, the room was dark. Sounds from the front told him that Frommer and Rariden were up in the bar, having a drink while they waited for him to come back to life. After they had had their drink, they would return and knock the stuffing out of him again. Grimness came up in him at the thought. With the grimness, came a kind of strength.

It was his idea that he was going to need all the strength he could find. He was physically weak, he had lost blood, and he was beaten half to death, but he had once seen a man walk a hundred yards with a bullet in his heart. It sometimes happened that way. Even after a man was supposed to be dead, he could keep on going, if he was mad enough. There were deep reserves of strength hidden inside every human being, available for emergencies. It was Jeff Hale's opinion that he was face to face with such an emergency. He had to get out of this room.

He started to get off the bunk, but found he couldn't move. His feet were tied to one end of the bunk, his hands to the other. He had been too dazed to notice the ropes until he tried to move.

He lay in the darkness, cursing. By stretching, he could get enough freedom to move his hands several inches, but he could not move them far enough to take hold of the rope with his fingers. By twisting and turning, he could get the knot at his wrists to his teeth. He found the knot in the darkness, began to worry it. The taste of hemp and tar were strong in his mouth. Then there was another taste, warm and salty, blood from his lips and tongue. The knot didn't give.

He heard a sound at the window. The

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window had no glass in it, only a heavy wooden shutter outside the wall. The men who used this room didn't care to have glass in its windows. The shutter was locked on the inside. A rasping, creaking sound came from outside, as if somebody were using a pinch bar out there to pry the shutter open.

A snap sounded as the catch broke. The shutter opened and the window became a blur of moonlight. A head appeared in the moonlight.

"Jeff?" a scared voice whispered. "Jeff? Are you in there?"

He tried to answer, but his lips wouldn't work. Memories were fluttering through his mind. A picture was forming there, the picture of a tall girl, her hair in braids, her long legs in levis, who had once followed him around like a shadow. He couldn't remember her name, but her face was still in his mind.

He spat blood and strands of rope out of his mouth and found his voice.

"Who—who is it?"

"Jeff!" Sudden gladness sounded in the voice. A long, levi-clad leg came through the window. "Jeff! I heard them beating you. Where are you?"

It was a girl coming through the window. There was no mistaking the voice.

"Here I am," Jeff answered. "All tied up like a steer waiting to be branded."

THE GIRL was instantly at his side. She made bitter protesting sounds as her fingers found the ropes. He could not see where she got the knife but he knew that it came out of her pocket. She was still the tomboy who carried pieces of string, licorice, and a knife in her pocket, like a boy. The blade of the knife was sharp. It went easily through the ropes. He swung his feet off the bunk, got to his feet. The girl caught him, steadied him.

"Who are you?" He still couldn't remember her name. "Where on earth did you come from?"

"Don't you remember me?" The tone of her voice said that he had hurt her feelings, that she had hoped he would remember her.

He caught her shoulders. "I remember your voice and I've got a perfect picture of you in my mind. But your name—Thalia! That's it! Thalia!"

"Yes." She was smiling now. The fact that he had remembered her name pleased her.

"What are you doing here? How did you know I was here? How did you get the guts—I mean the courage to come here?"

"Shhhh. I saw you fall off your horse and the two men carry you in here. I knew something was wrong. Jeff, they hinted you might be an outlaw. They said you were their pal."

"And you came anyhow, to help me?"

"Of course!"

"Girl—" He choked over the words he wanted to say.

"Jeff! You can talk later. We've got to get out of here, fast. Out the window with you."

He found he needed help in getting out the window. She followed him. He had to lean on her arm as they stumbled down the alley.

"I'm taking you to my house," she said. "You'll be safe there. And Daddy will be glad to see you."

Her father looked up as they came through the kitchen door. A look of surprise appeared on the old saddlemaker's face, then went swiftly away. All his life he had been accustomed to having his daughter bring sick cats to him, dogs with broken legs, baby birds that had fallen out of their nests, for treatment. There was nothing surprising about her bringing home a stray. True, this was the first time she had brought home a stray man, and a badly battered one at that, but that time had had to come, too. Her father showed no surprise. He said he was glad to see Jeff again, and then got quickly to work helping his daughter do what had to be done.

An hour later, Jeff Hale's head was bandaged, and he was full of hot coffee, steak, and potatoes. With the food in him, strength was coming back.

He lit a cigarette and let the strength flow through him. The world was no longer

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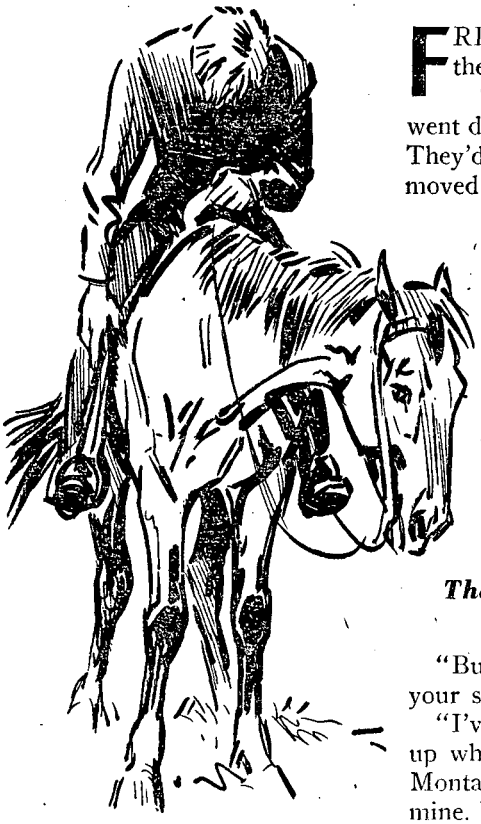
a waving, dancing unstable place of mirages. He looked at Thalia and grinned. "You haven't changed much," he said.

"Oh, but I have," she said, and blushed.

"Yeah," her father said. "She's wearing dresses now, part of the time."

"Dad, you keep out of this," Thalia said quickly.

"Well, thanks to both of you," Jeff said.



"I'll pay you off some day. You certainly saved my neck." Tersely he told them what had happened.

"I knew you weren't an outlaw," Thalia said.

"For the last couple of months those two hombres, Rariden and Frommer, have been trying to make friends with me, planning this holdup."

"We're glad we can help you," Thalia said. "And you don't owe us anything."

"I'll be the judge of that," Jeff answered. "And now I'd like to ask one more favor."

"Sure, Jeff. What is it?" the girl said. "We've got a spare room. We'll be glad for you to stay here as long as you like."

"That might be an awful long time, if you were here," Jeff said. He watched the color come into her face. "But I wasn't thinking about a spare room."

"What was it then?"

"I want you to lend me a gun," Jeff answered.

FRIGHT, a spreading wave of it, took the glow from her face. "But, Jeff—"

"A sixgun," he went on. His hand went down to the cartridge belt at his waist. They'd taken his gun but they hadn't removed the belt. "I've got plenty of shells."

The man slumped in the saddle

"But, Jeff! You've got to rest, got to get your strength back."

"I've got to sit around here and rest up while two murderers light a shuck for Montana? That paymaster was a friend of mine. Will you lend me a gun, sir?"

"Dad, no!"

The old man shook his head at his daughter. "Sorry, Thalia. A man in Jeff's position has a right to ask for a gun." The old man rose to his feet and opened the door of a closet in the big kitchen.

The sixgun was blue metal with wooden grips. It was fully loaded. Jeff took it, hefted it. "Thank you sir," he said.

Crash!

The glass in the kitchen window fell in shattered bits to the floor. The twin muzzles of a shotgun appeared there, and behind the shotgun was Fat Rariden.

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"Stand still! Get your hands up!" Rariden shouted.

The twin muzzles of the gun covered the girl.

Jeff let the sixgun drop to the floor. He stood without moving. An attempt to move would get Thalia killed. Fat Rariden already stood in the shadow of a rope. Rariden couldn't be hung any higher for killing a woman than for killing a paymaster. Slowly Jeff lifted his hands.

The kitchen door opened. Ed Frommer came in. The grin of a wolf was on his face. He had a sixgun in his hand. He looked at Thalia, "So you did know him!" he said. "I knew you were lying." His eyes went up and down the trim figure of the girl. "Well," he said. "This makes things a little different."

At the expression on Frommer's face, Jeff Hale wished that he hadn't dropped the sixgun.

"We were just going to ask Jeff to take a little ride with us," Frommer said. "Now that I've seen you, I think I'll take you along too, for the trip." A grin appeared on the man's face.

The old saddlemaker took a deep breath. "No!" he said. His voice was a hoarse throb of sound.

Thalia's face was paper white.

"Naw, Ed," Fat Rariden said, from the window. "Lay off the gal. We just want this smart guy and the payroll. We don't want to get ourselves mixed up with no women."

"You won't be getting mixed up with any women," Frommer said. "I'm the one who is getting mixed up."

"We'll be in it together," Rariden protested. "You got to learn to stay away from women."

"This one will be different."

"Fat makes good sound sense," Jeff spoke. "I'll take a trip with you. But leave the girl here. She doesn't know where the payroll is hidden."

Frommer's eyes lit up. "So that's the way the wind blows? You'll be likely to take us to where the payroll is hidden a lot quicker if she's with us."

Jeff Hale almost lost control of himself then. He almost snatched for the gun lying on the floor at his feet.

"Come on in, Fat, and help me tie the old man up," Frommer said. "We'll leave him here. I'll tie up the gal myself, to make certain the ropes don't bruise her." He smirked as he spoke.

Fat Rariden disappeared from the window, reappeared in the door. He pulled a ball of heavy cord from his pocket. Thalia moved toward him.

"If I have to have my hands tied behind my back, I'd rather have Fat do it," she said. "He looks to me like the only man around here."

A thundercloud formed on Frommer's face.

Fat Rariden blinked in astonished surprise. A grin appeared on his face. No woman had ever said such a nice thing about him before. He was greatly pleased to discover such a thing could happen. He gulped at Thalia as she moved toward him.

"Maybe I'll go riding with you too, Fat," the girl said. "Instead of with him." The nod of her head indicated Frommer.

"Golly, gal!" Fat gasped.

She grabbed the barrel of the shotgun and threw her body across it, forcing the muzzle downward to the floor.

The thundercloud on Ed Frommer's face exploded as Jeff Hale brought his hands down and brought them up again as fists. Jeff's left exploded against Frommer's jaw just under the ear.

A split second before the girl reached Fat Rariden, Jeff had guessed her intention. He knew she was going to grab that shotgun. It was too late to shout to her not to do it, even if he could have stopped her. He doubted if there was any way to stop a woman who had taken the bit in her teeth. The only thing to do was to go with her. She was calling the turn, she was taking a desperate chance here and now rather than wait until they were out of the house.

ALL JEFF'S newly regained strength went into the blow that landed under Ed Frommer's jaw. Hate of this man was a driving fury in him. He remembered his beating, and the dead paymaster.

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Ed Frommer was looking at the girl moving toward Fat Rariden. When she had indicated she preferred Fat to him, she had jolted his pride. This was the kind of slight that Frommer wouldn't be likely to forget or forgive. To have a woman imply that she preferred Fat Rariden to him was more than he could stand.

He didn't have to stand it long. When Jeff's fist landed under his ear, he was no longer standing. He was on the floor against the wall between the big kitchen range and the woodbox.

He didn't have his gun. That was jarred out of his grip the instant Jeff's blow landed. As Frommer went down, Jeff followed him, a driving charge that kept right up with the man as he went down. Jeff went in with his knees, elbows, and fists, all of them flailing. Jeff knew he was fighting a man lower than a rattlesnake, that in this fight no holds were barred, no mean advantage would be overlooked.

Frommer's knee came up, landing in Jeff's middle. Stars exploded in Jeff's brain, pain roared through him.

For a split second, the pain paralyzed him, made it impossible for him to move. During that second he felt Frommer hit him, jolting blows that came upward from the floor. He ducked his head down against Frommer's chest and held on. In seconds, the pain subsided.

Then a shotgun roared behind him.

Jeff didn't dare turn his head to see what had happened. If Thalia had been in the way of that shotgun blast—

His left hand dived for Frommer's throat, found it, locked there. His right hand was a maul that pounded relentlessly against Frommer's face. Jeff knew the killer was fighting back, or was trying to. Frommer was desperate and the strength of desperation was in him. But Jeff Hale was like a wild man. His fist smashed against Frommer's jaw and kept on smashing there until Jeff realized the man was limp. Jeff came to his feet then, whirling and looking for Fat Rariden and that shotgun.

Jeff saw where the slugs had gone. Into the floor! Also, Fat had dropped the gun. He had his hands full. Thalia had grabbed the man around the waist, and Fat was trying to claw her loose from him.

Her father was beside her, and as Jeff leaped to help her, he saw that her father had scooped the sixgun from the floor. Now he brought the heavy barrel down across Rariden's head.

A shudder went through Rariden, and every muscle in his body suddenly sagged. He went to the floor with a thud that shook the entire house and lay there, a mountain of inert flesh.

Jeff Hale wiped sweat from his face. "Thalia, are you all right?" he said anx-

Coming up in the next issue

DIABLO'S DAUGHTER

O'Hanlon's Best Friends Were Really His Worst Enemies

A Magazine-Length Novel

By TALMAGE POWELL

RAILROAD DOCTOR

The Kid Wanted to Heal Some Folks—and Murder Others!

Beginning a Powerful New Western Serial

By TODHUNTER BALLARD

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iously. "That shotgun didn't get you, did it?"

"It went into the floor. I'm all right."

"Pop, what about you?"

"I didn't have a chance to get into the fight real good," the old saddlemaker answered, grinning, "so I didn't get hurt. But it was a good fight while it lasted." He was kneeling beside Frommer, lashing the man's hands together.

"When you finish on him, you can start on Rariden," Jeff said. "Where's my horse?" he suddenly asked.

UNTIL this moment, he had completely forgotten about the horse. As he thought of the animal, he remembered that while Sam Kilson had been getting the money from the bank, Jeff had been in the restaurant across the street, getting a cup of coffee. With that picture came a possible solution to the problem of the missing payroll.

Thalia and her father stared at him.

"Don't just stand there! Where's my horse?" Jeff repeated.

"Jeff, are you out of your head? Why do you want your horse now? You're surely not going to try to ride on tonight—"

"I want my horse," Jeff repeated. "Do you know anything about him?"

"Yes. After I got over being scared, I realized he was your horse, and went and got him. He's in the stable behind the house now. Don't worry about him. He's all right."

"Give me a lantern," Jeff demanded. "No, not you, Pop. You stay here and watch Frommer and Rariden. I want to see about my horse."

The expression on Thalia's face said he was obviously out of his head. She humored him. She got the lantern for him and followed him to the small barn behind the house. The horse was there, all right. He whinnied as Jeff entered.

"There's your horse," Thalia said. "Now come on back into the house and lie down."

"Where's his saddle?"

"In the tack room. Jeff—"

"All right. I'm out of my head, but I want that saddle. Where's the tack room?"

The saddle was hanging on the wall, the saddlebags dangling below it. Jeff snatched them from the wall, opened them.

Out of them tumbled two plain canvas sacks. With trembling fingers, Jeff opened the sacks. In them, neatly packaged, were bundles of bills—the missing Red Dog payroll.

Thalia stared at them. "But how did the payroll get there?" she asked.

"Sam Kilson thought maybe he was going to get held up. In order to protect the payroll, he put it into my saddlebags when I wasn't looking. That way, even if they got him, they didn't get the money."

Jeff grinned at her. "They'll be mighty glad to see this money at the mine," he said. "But I guess they can wait a day or two to get it. I wouldn't be at all surprised if while I'm here you and me get hitched up. Now am I out of my head?"

"No, Jeff. I mean yes."

He swept her into his arms, and his lips found hers.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 69)

1. Sam Bass.
2. His head, sometimes a little of his back if a high swimmer.
3. Fort Union.
4. (a) A magnificent gorge.
5. Denver, Colorado.
6. Yes. Several to Sedalia, Mo., also Shreveport and New Orleans, La.
7. (b) A nonpoisonous reptile.
8. Abel Head (Shanghai) Pierce.
9. With his tail anchored to a burro, a bronc had a hard time doing much bucking. At least he couldn't pitch very high, but sometimes it was pretty hard on the burro!
10. Oregon and particularly Washington.

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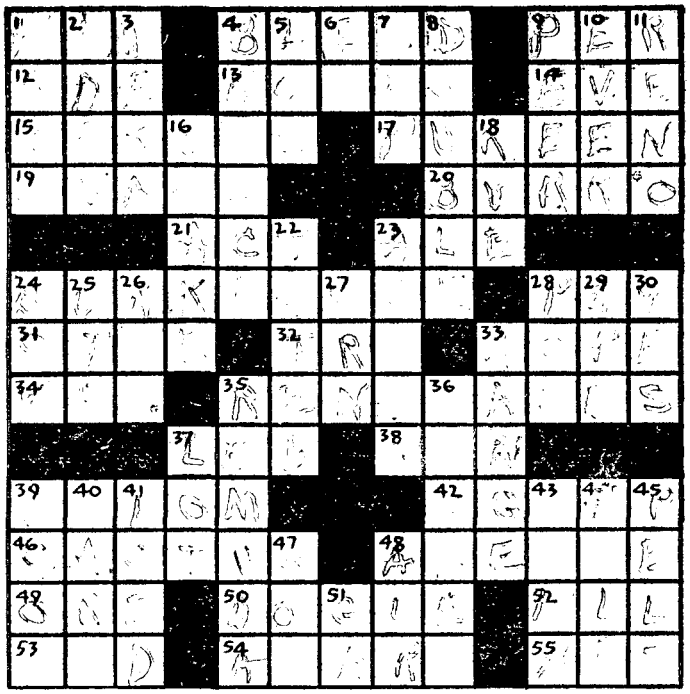
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 — and eggs
4 To mix
9 For each
12 Fruit beverage
13 Popular Western entertainment
14 First woman
15 Lariats
17 Vessel for serving soup
19 City in Nebraska
20 "Mountain canary"
21 To behave
23 Malt beverage
24 Cowboys' sleeping quarters
28 Wages
31 Indian of Oklahoma
32 Trustees (abbr.)
33 Lasso
34 But
35 Vicious horses
37 Guided
38 Large cask
39 Local expression
42 Fragment
46 Western desert plant
48 On land
49 Native mineral
50 Motherless calf
52 To be sick
53 Man's nickname
54 Alone
55 Nathaniel's nickname

DOWN

1 Circle of light
2 First man
3 Western tableland
4 To introduce, as a topic
5 — Angeles, Calif.
6 Edward's nickname
7 Twine fabric
8 Twice as much
9 To look curiously
10 Always
11 City in Nevada
16 To tremble
18 To regret
22 Carried (colloq.)
23 Item of value
24 Lad
25 Indian of Utah
26 Negative
27 Vase
28 Seed container
29 Monkey
30 Affirmative answer
33 Western cattle farm
35 Group of saddle horses
36 Small insert in a garment
37 Building site
39 Image
40 To challenge
41 Chilled
43 Coloring of horses
44 Operatic solo
45 Animal's skin
47 To dip in a liquid
48 Atmosphere
51 Georgia (abbr.)

C	O	L	T		W	R	A	N	G	L	E	R
A	V	O	W		H	O	N	O	R	A	R	Y
R	E	N	O		A	P	T		A	C	R	E
E	N	G		A	L	E		P	I	E		
		H	E	R	E		M	A	N		M	A
S	H	O	N	E		B	A	D		H	E	N
H	E	R	D		R	U	T		N	E	S	T
U	R	N		M	A	Y		H	O	R	S	E
T	O		C	O	W		D	U	D	E		
		L	O	W		F	E	E		F	A	R
I	C	O	N		G	A	S		L	O	C	O
M	A	V	E	R	I	C	K		I	R	M	A
P	R	E	S	E	N	T	S		E	D	E	N

Solution to the puzzle in the preceding issue

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A MAN'S WAY

WHEN SCOTT was accused of murder everyone turned against him—even the man who'd committed the crime

By W. W. Hartwig

NOISE outside his house woke him. Scott Tracy jerked up in bed, every nerve taut. A caller at this time of night meant trouble.

He cursed himself for leaving his gun out of reach. Then, "Scott—" a voice called. "Scott, it's Dean."

Scott snorted. Dean Humber! "Well, come in!" he yelled. There was the gruff anger of relief in his voice. The door swung open and then slammed shut again. Scott could see nothing in the dark. He heard a boot scuff on the rough floor.

"Creeping lizards!" he exploded. "Prowling around a man's place at night, you might get shot! Light that lamp on the table."

The light came up and Scott squinted at his visitor. Dean had a round face, with little black eyes. Tonight it looked drawn, the eyes sunken.

"Great bobcats, kid! What's wrong with you?"

"I'm in trouble," Dean said, his voice cracking a little.

Scott reached for his wool shirt and put it on. He wondered what Dean had been up to this time. In a way, Dean was Scott's problem, because Peg Humber said she wouldn't marry Scott until Dean settled down and went to work in the store with Mr. Humber. The way things were going, that day was a long way off. Dean's mother had been Mr. Humber's second

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"I know Dean is covering up for someone," Peg said

wife, and when she died Mr. Humber adopted Dean. The boy had been a great disappointment. Peg was Mr. Humber's daughter by a first wife who had died when Peg was born.

Scott pulled up his trousers and went over to the stove. "You look like you'd seen a ghost," he said as he poked up the kindling and set fire to it. The fire fanned and Scott put a couple of pine sticks on it. The pitch caught and sizzled. He shoved the coffee pot on, then turned to Dean and motioned with his hand for him to sit down. Scott sat opposite him at the table.

"Now," he said, "let's have it."

"It—it's Carrie James," Dean began.

"Carrie James!" Scott echoed. Carrie was from town. Scott had seen her at the Palace. He'd been close enough to have to catch his breath as she brushed by. She was that kind of woman. But Dean didn't measure up to her type.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking," Dean said, his eyes resting for a second on Scott, then skittering away. "But she didn't fool me. I knew she was just having fun with a punk kid."

If Dean had been half a man, Scott thought, he'd keep a confession like that to himself. "Go on," he said out loud. "You said you were in trouble."

"Real trouble," Dean said. "Scott, help me this time and I'll never ask you again."

"That's what you've said before."

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Scott poured a cup of coffee and set it down in front of Dean.

"What about Carrie James?" Scott asked.

"She's dead," Dean said flatly.

Scott gripped the edge of the table.

"It was an accident," Dean told him. "I swear it was. She fell off that ledge back of the little lean-to on the northeast corner of your ranch out by Eagle Peak."

"You had her out at my cabin?"

Dean said, his eyes down, "I didn't think you'd find out and it was close enough to town, and still out where nobody goes much. She'd rented a buggy at the livery stable and picked me up at the edge of town. She was kind of high-strung tonight, and we had an argument. She ran out onto that ledge and it gave way with her. It took me a long time to find her in the dark, but she was dead. She's half-buried in rocks, but by daylight you could see her from the road. That's why I have to tell about it. I can't hide it."

"Go to the sheriff, then," Scott said. "Why drag me in?"

"You know what this would do to Dad and Peg if it got around I was alone with her in that cabin. Scott, you're my friend. You've got to help me. We could say we were out there together, just you and me, going to do some work on the fences tomorrow. We could say she drove up; alone, out for air after her night at the Palace. She felt sick, we'll say she told us, and saw our light and stopped. We gave her water, and after a while she felt better. She went out the back and didn't see the ledge in the dark. It gave way with her. Part of it's the truth. They'd believe us—the two of us together."

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you?" Scott said bitterly.

Scott put out the fire, took down his big coat from the peg on the wall and started to douse the light. "But get this," he said, without turning around. "I'm not doing this because of you. I'm doing it for Peg. Just understand that."

Dean shuffled along after Scott. "You better do the talking, Scott," he said. "I don't think they'd believe me."

WHEN THEY WOKE the sheriff Scott could see he didn't like being roused in the middle of the night. He tempered up right off and stayed that way the whole ride out to Eagle Peak. Dawn streaks scratched the night sky as the three men climbed back up to the level. There was a moan of wind blowing down the canyon off the peak. Scott turtled his head down inside his coat collar and kept his lips tight. Dean leaned against the cabin porch. His face was sick.

Sheriff Raynor looked about sharply. "You sure Carrie James didn't come out here to meet you, Scott?"

"Not likely," Scott replied. "Dean was here, you know."

Raynor grunted. "Seems strange, Dean, you coming out here at all." He blew warm air into his cupped hands and then stuffed them down inside his coat pockets. "Let's get home," he said. "I'll send the boys for her body tomorrow. Both of you stop by my office tomorrow. I got a few more questions to ask you."

After chores that same morning, Scott rode into town. It was only midmorning, but he could see the news had gotten around. There was a gathering in front of the funeral parlor. Scott jogged by, his back feeling chilled by a dozen pair of eyes. He tied up in front of the Humber Mercantile Store and walked in.

Peg was behind the counter measuring out a dress length; otherwise the store was deserted. That struck Scott as odd. Peg looked up. He could see a dark shadow beneath her eyes, and a worried look that bothered him.

"Morning, Peg," he said, trying to be cheerful. "Dean in?"

Peg's hands stopped their work. "I should think you'd let him alone, after last night." There was anger in her tone. "How did you get him to say he was out there with you?"

"Is that what Dean told you, that he's just saying he was there and that he wasn't?"

"No, not exactly. He keeps repeating he went out with you to help with some work. But I know Dean. I know he's lying. Be-

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sides, what on earth would he go for? You know as well as I do he hates the sight of work. He's covering up for someone."

Uneasiness stirred in Scott. "What are you trying to say, Peg?" he asked.

Being straightforward was one of the things Scott liked about Peg. Now she spoke right out. "That you deliberately used Dean to protect yourself from a lot of talk. I'm sorry, Scott. What else can I think?"

"I don't know," he said. He was trapped. He couldn't tell her the truth—that's what he was trying to keep from her. If Dean had been a more convincing liar this wouldn't have happened. She would have believed the story as they'd planned it out. He wanted to talk to Dean, but he had a good idea Peg had him in the parlor room back of the store and that she'd never let him go in there. Even if he could see Mr. Humber, it might help. Scott looked around the store.

"I think it best you keep away from all of us," Peg said, her voice very small. "At least until this thing blows over."

"You want it that way?" he asked.

"Yes."

I don't believe it, he thought. Not underneath, Peg didn't want it this way. She was just confused. She'd come round later.

He turned and walked out of the store, the sound of his boots on the plank floor slapping back at him. He'd see the sheriff and get things straight for the record. Then Peg would believe him.

BUT IT wasn't easy. Sheriff Raynor insisted on sending for Dean. Peg came with him. She sat on a chair with her eyes down and her hands folded in her lap. Several men came in off the street, and presently the room was crowded and hot.

When Dean told his story his voice was like a parrot reciting what he had been taught. Scott cursed under his breath. No wonder everybody thought Dean was covering up. And if they insisted on thinking that both of them were not in the cabin last night, it was plain to Scott they'd never suspect Dean of meeting Carrie James.

Sheriff Raynor's voice cut into his thoughts. "Scott, we've all known you a long time, and I trust you. Give me your answer to one question and I'll close this investigation. Did Carrie James go to your cabin last night to meet you?"

Scott felt his face redden. Every eye was upon him. Peg's head bobbed up. She looked directly at him, her lips parted. Thank God it was a question he could answer truthfully!

"No," he said. "She did not."

Peg looked down again, but not before Scott saw the shimmer of tears in her eyes. But she didn't speak to him, even after it was over. She held her head high and Dean, not glancing at Scott, led her out of the office and down the street. Scott bit his teeth down hard.

"Better stay out of town a few days, Scott," Sheriff Raynor said. "You know how people are. They like to talk, but they forget fast, too."

The older man gave Scott a pat on the shoulder. Why didn't somebody give Dean a little advice? He was the one who needed it.

Scott was scowling as he got his horse. Well, maybe the kid would set things right with Peg when he got home. It was the least he could do after what Scott had done for him. . . .

Scott spent a restless night. The next day he expected to go to town to try to see Peg, but there was so much to catch up on for the one day already lost that he put it off. Anyway, he half expected Dean might ride out. He kept looking down the road where it humped over the hill, but Dean didn't show. That night he fried up a big pan of potatoes and a thick slice of bacon, then sizzled up some eggs with chili peppers, but he couldn't eat. He just sat there with the big plate in front of him, staring at the circle of light the lamp cast on the table. . . .

Next day he thought to heck with the ranch work, he'd go to town. He needed supplies anyway. He put on a clean shirt and trousers, hitched up the wagon, and started to town. The sun felt warm on his back. He dreamed about the day he and Peg

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could be married. Dean would straighten out pretty soon, and Scott's credit was good at the bank. He could get a loan and really put his ranch in fit shape to bring a bride to. The day shouldn't be too far off.

And then he got a tight feeling in the middle of his stomach. It sort of lumped, like too much of his own cooking did to him sometimes. Peg wasn't even speaking to him!

SCOTT DREW UP at the feed store. "Howdy, Lex," he said, crossing to the counter that spread across the side of the store. Lex Moore looked up from some book work he was doing at the far end. Scott grinned and dug his hand deep into the bran barrel and licked some of it off his hand, as he always did.

But Lex didn't kid back same as usual. He acted confused.

"Got a list here," Scott said, ignoring it. "Put it in the wagon, will you, Lex? I'll be back for it in about an hour."

Lex cleared his throat. He was a slight man, and his glasses gave him an owlish look. "About that bill that's running here, Scott," he said. Scott squinted up one eye in surprise. "Think you could take care of that now?" Scott stared at him. Lex ran his hand along the counter, swiping off a couple of unseen cobwebs. He hardly looked at Scott now. His glasses reflected the light from outside the door as the sun slanted in. It made it hard for Scott to fathom what was going on in Lex's mind.

"You mean my credit's no good?" he asked sharply.

"I didn't say exactly that," Lex answered. "It's just that there's been so much talk the last few days I thought maybe you might be leaving town. That bill is pretty big. I didn't want you to forget it."

"That what everybody's saying, that I'm going to leave town?" Scott snapped. He could almost feel the red getting brighter in his rusty hair. "Well, take it from me, I'm not leaving town. Put up that order. I'll see you get paid in full."

He spun on his heel and went out into the sunshine. It wasn't so warm any more. Sheriff Raynor had been right; people liked to talk, all right. Scott walked straight to the bank and barged angrily through the door.

Homer Alden owned the bank. Scott knocked on his office door, then opened it in one sweep and went inside, leaving the door open so anybody could listen who wanted to.

Mr. Alden stood up. He was too fat to move fast, but his eyes were quick. Scott saw them raking him over.

"I'll come to the point," Scott said. "I just heard folks are talking about me. Some seem to think I might even leave town. The fact that I cleared myself as far as the sheriff is concerned seems to make no difference. They think I'm implicated with Carrie James's death."

Mr. Alden shrugged. "You know how people talk."

"I'm beginning to find out," Scott said. "What I want to know is, does all this have any effect on my credit here at the bank? If I wanted a loan on my ranch now, would I get it?"

Alden hedged. Then he looked over at Scott. "I think you deserve a straight answer," he said. "No, you wouldn't get it. The way things are now, you're not a good risk. Any man who runs with a woman like Carrie James, or lets himself get involved with her, isn't steady enough to put much faith in. You know as well as I do that lending money on a ranch is as much on the man's success as the ranch itself. I know you say you didn't know her. I'd be inclined to believe you, except for one thing. The Humbers aren't talking to you. Everybody knows about you and Peg Humber. If she doesn't believe you, you can't expect the rest of us to. I guess that answers your question."

Scott grunted. "I guess it does."

Outside the bank, Scott stood for a moment holding Alden's words in his mind, not defiantly, but not resignedly, either. He stood on the slatted, sun-warped walk, blinking, throwing a swift glance along the dirt street at the wooden buildings, the saddlery, the cafe, the Humber store. This was his town. He wasn't going to let it get away from him.

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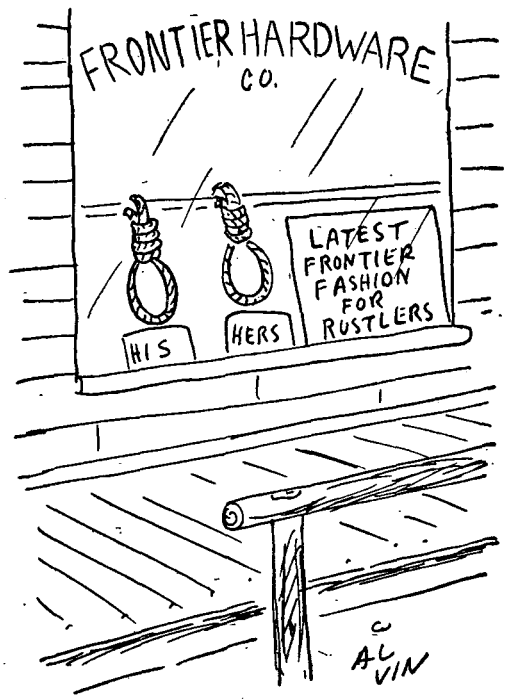
THE STORE was busy with sun-bonneted women when Scott burst in. Deliberate strides took him back of the counter and into the parlor. Peg followed, white-faced. Scott defiantly searched the bedrooms.

"I want Dean," he said, coming back into the parlor.

"He's not here," Peg answered. She looked at him curiously. "I've never seen you this way, Scott."

"I never had to be this way," he told her. "My girl hates me, my reputation's gone, my credit's shut off—what do you expect a man to do? Run and hide like Dean?"



"Scott—"

He didn't let her finish. He walked out on her.

Dean was nowhere, and finally Scott had to give up the search. You could stand just so much of people staring at you and whispering behind your back as you passed. He got his wagon and drove the horses out of town at a gallop.

Home at the ranch, he unhitched, went over to the water bucket and doused his head till his shirt collar was soaked. He wasn't used to all this thinking he'd been doing the past few days. Life had always gone fairly smooth—hard maybe, but more or less in a pattern. But it sure was busted wide open now, with tracks leading off into nothing but dead-end gullys, so far as he could see. It was hard to settle down, to know what to do with himself, now he was home.

He wanted to talk to somebody; he hadn't had a civil word in days. He thought about Jason Miers, who lived over the hill. Jason was always friendly, and since he had a bad spell with his heart, Scott had taken to riding over from time to time to help him with some of the heavy work.

Scott saddled his bay and set off across the range. It was a hot ride, mostly in the full sun, but Scott was used to that. When the green clump of trees and the windmill that marked the Miers ranch house came into view, Scott took a long breath. It was always this way when he saw the place. The white house with the vines growing up it, the porch where a man could sit on a cool night, the fresh painted barns and the clean raked yard—that was what Scott wanted, with Peg standing by the door, a flush of happiness on her cheeks.

Scott gave the side of his leg a whack with the end of his reins. That was a dream he'd better not think about today.

He saw Mrs. Miers come out of the kitchen as he rode into the yard. She had on a white apron, and Scott could see flour on her arms as she wiped her hands on the apron. His mouth watered for a hunk of her bread with wild plum jam spread on it, or a slice of pie all full of apples and juice. She always had something for him when he rode over. But today she looked close enough to see who he was, then she turned fast and let the screen door slam behind her and never so much as waved at him.

It set him to thinking again, but he wasn't quite sure. He found Jason sawing wood down back of the wood shed. Scott knew he

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must have seen him ride up, but he kept on working. Scott got down and stood by his horse.

"Thought you might have some work I could give you a hand with," Scott said. There was a silence. "Would have been over sooner, only I've been busy lately."

"So I heard," Jason said. He straightened up. He was a big man, with a mustache that was thick and heavy to match his eyebrows. He had trouble with his breathing, now that his heart was bad. It made him act tired and out of breath all the time. Scott could see it was worse today.

"Fact is," Jason went on, taking his time, spacing his words with his short breaths, "You can't help me today—or any day. You been good to me, but from what I hear about you dragging in that Dean Humber on your escapades, I'd rather you'd stay away from here. A man's life is his own to throw away as he sees fit, but when he takes advantage of a friend, he's not to be trusted."

Scott reddened, and his heart thumped against his ribs.

"You're wrong, Miers," he said. "You and everybody else. All I got to say is, a lot of people are going to have to choke over a lot of words once they get set straight. For now, I'm keeping my mouth shut. But I don't know how long I'll last out. A man can take just so much!"

HE GOT on his horse and spurred out the yard with the thick dust just the end of the ranch lane spreading out behind him and following up and over the hill. He didn't stop till he knew he couldn't see the Miers place any longer. Then he pulled up, the heavy breathing of his horse like billows beneath his legs. He hated himself. Taking it out on an animal. He ran his hand along the horse's sweaty neck. Extra feed tonight for this animal, he thought to himself, then pressed the horse into a walk. He topped the ridge and rode along it for a while. Down there was his land, and those were his cattle. He'd built this place up from four hundred head—work, sweat, and dreams, all shot to hell in one week's time.

Dean could straighten it out. All he had to do was stand up like a man and tell his story as if he meant it. Scott wasn't asking him to tell the truth—just to stick to the story as Scott had told it so folks wouldn't think Scott was hiding something.

Scott didn't blame people for turning against him, the way things looked. But Peg should have had more faith in him.

He loped along again, easy this time. In the distance he could see Eagle Peak. He gritted his teeth. He'd burn that blasted cabin down first thing tomorrow!

It was half an hour later when Scott saw the rider come over the ridge in the road and draw into his place. He had just watered his horse and was getting ready to look after the calves in the barn. He stood still and waited.

It wasn't Dean. It was the kid who ran errands from the hotel in town. He looked like the ride had been too much for him, the way he flopped off his horse and hit for the dipper in the water bucket at the side of the house.

"I got a note for you," the kid said.

Scott unfolded the paper. The writing was printed. "If you value the reputation of your friend," it said, "you will come to the stable back of the hotel at once." There was no signature.

Scott balled the paper in his fist. What in tarnation had that damn kid gotten into now! If he had any sense, Scott thought, he'd let Dean and his reputation go to blazes. But Peg, he thought—he'd gone this far to protect her. Things couldn't get much worse. Maybe he'd get the chance to talk to Dean. That's all he needed, just a few words to set the kid straight.

He rode into town. The stable in back of the hotel was set in a clump of cottonwoods. It was big and weather-browned. It wasn't used much any more, and Scott couldn't see any horses in the corral. He tied up at the rack in front. Against the sun outside, the entrance looked like a dark hole gouged out of the building front. It was dark in there. Anything might be waiting to happen in that deserted spot. Scott approached cautiously. Holding to the side, he slipped around the corner of the wide flung door.

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Hugging the shadows just inside, he waited. There was no sound except the thump of his own heart, and the hum of flies.

Scott relaxed. Apparently he was alone. He hiked himself up on the feed box and kept his eye on the entrance. Once he thought he heard a slight sound, but it was followed by silence so he surmised it was just his jumpy imagination.

THE AFTERNOON had spent itself, with shadows hugging the ground in lengthening patches, when Scott heard the unmistakable sound of his own name being called from outside the barn. He jumped into sight. It was Peg. She looked very tired.

"It's no use waiting any longer," she said. "He won't come."

"Who?"

"Dean. Scott, I tricked you." She looked up at him and the anguish in her expression dissolved completely any anger he had thought he felt toward her. "Something about the way you acted today made me stop and think. Maybe I was misjudging you. It wasn't like you to do what I was thinking. I listened to Dean—too much, I guess." Color flushed her cheeks. "I decided one of you was protecting the other. I had to know which one it was. I wrote identical notes to you and Dean. I've been waiting here ever since. Hiding back in a stall in the barn. You came right away, Scott," she said, giving him a little smile that sent his pulse to racing. "Dean isn't here yet. I guess he doesn't care what happens to you. I have the answer to my question."

"Peg—" He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "They're saying such awful things."

"I've got to find Dean," he told her. "I've got to talk to him."

They both heard the sound at the same time and turned quickly. Sheriff Raynor stood six feet from them. His badge glinted in the low rays of the sun.

He squinted his eyes at Scott. "You told me you never set foot in that buggy of that James woman," he said.

"I didn't," Scott answered. Something about the way the sheriff looked made him stiffen, as if to ward off what might be coming.

"Then how come I found your watch in the floor of that buggy?"

Scott stared at the sheriff. Peg stepped away, her eyes going instantly to Scott.

"It had your name in it," Sheriff Raynor added.

Scott had lent that watch to Dean two months ago when Dean wanted to dress grown-up for a special dance in town. He had never returned it. Scott knew better than to tell that story to the sheriff. Raynor would never believe it, and Scott wouldn't blame him. Besides, it would give Dean away for sure.

"If you lie about one thing," Sheriff Raynor said, "you probably lie about other things, too. Maybe it wasn't an accident, after all. She could have been pushed off that ledge, you know. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come with me, Scott. Let's go."

Scott felt a lump in his throat. Peg was still looking at him. What faith would she have in him now?

Sheriff Raynor jerked his head, and Scott forced his feet to move.

Peg swung around to face him. Her eyes were near tears. "I'll find Dean," she said. "I'll make him come to you."

Peg was with him, believing in him! Even as they entered the sheriff's office, Scott kept telling himself that over and over. He saw the jail cage in the far end of the room.

"Do I have to go in there?" he asked.

"Maybe not," Sheriff Raynor answered, eying him closely. "It's up to you. Depends on what you have to say."

"I won't talk until Dean Humber gets here," Scott told him.

"Then you can wait in there," the sheriff said.

SCOTT WATCHED the barred door being closed and the lock clamped. He went over and sat on the bench in the corner and rolled a smoke. It tasted bitter and he ground it out with his heel. At least

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he had Peg on his side now; that was something. But it was clear he couldn't protect her much longer. Perhaps he had been wrong to do it in the first place. If Dean would come through even now, they could put it over and nobody would get hurt. It was in the kid, Scott knew, but how to bring it out was another matter.

It got dark. The sheriff turned up lamps. Scott had an idea he usually went home about now for dinner, but tonight Raynor was staying late. Did he expect Dean, too? Scott liked the sheriff, he was a good man and fine in his job. He held no grudge against him.

Raynor brought him a plate of food from the restaurant down the street, but Scott waved it away. He took a mug of coffee though and watched the steam from it escaping up into the air. By the time he got to drinking it, it was cold. He set it down on the floor.

Then all of a sudden the door opened and Scott jumped up and looked out through the bars. It was Peg, and she had Dean with her. She saw him and her lips trembled.

"Let me out of this thing!" Scott shouted, shaking the door with his hands.

Sheriff Raynor come and let him out. Scott went into the middle of the office room and stood still, his heart racing. Dean was over by the wall, leaning listlessly against it.

"The sheriff thinks maybe Carrie James was pushed off that ledge," Scott threw at Dean.

Dean came to life at that. "No," he cried. "It was an accident. I swear that!"

The sheriff picked up the watch and showed it to Dean. "I found this in the buggy. It belongs to Scott. I want to know how it got there." Dean looked at Scott, fright glassing over his eyes. The sheriff shook his head. "No use asking him. Scott won't talk till you do."

Dean hesitated. Peg went over to him, laid her hand on his arm. She looked up at him. "Dean, are you deliberately trying to make it look bad for Scott so as to clear yourself?"

Dean looked at Scott. Scott could see he was fighting with himself. "Yes," he said at last, his voice low. "I guess that's what I'm doing. I'm no good. I'm yellow and afraid. I've tried to make everything I said as unconvincing as possible so people would think I was covering up for Scott. Scott, I—"

Scott dug his toes against his boot soles to keep from leaping at Dean.

"Go ahead," Dean cried. "Beat me up. I deserve it!"

Scott reached out and bunched Dean's shirt and vest in his hand and jerked him close. He could feel Dean's heart pounding. Dean was soft and fleshy. The feel of him made Scott sick.

He shoved him away. "You don't deserve it," Scott said. "Only a man should be hit."

Dean's face went white. He lurched forward and hit Scott. The blow landed in the stomach. It surprised Scott, but it didn't hurt. Dean had been too excited to put any weight back of it, but it made a new look come in Dean's eyes. He stepped back, his fist clenched. He looked at it, then pounded it into his left palm.

"That did it," he said. "You're right, Scott. It does feel good to act like a man." He seemed to grow an inch as he held himself up right. "Sheriff, I'm ready to talk now. I'll give you the truth. Scott has been shielding me through this whole thing. I want everybody to know it."

He turned back to Scott. "Look," he said, his voice strong. "This is to show I've learned my lesson. This is for all the times you should have tanned my hide."

His fist shot out again. This time it had punch. It landed smack on Scott's right cheek. Scott reeled back against the chair and clung to it.

"That enough for you?" Dean grinned.

Scott rubbed his cheek. "Sure is," he said.

He looked over at Peg and gave her a lopsided grin.

"You know, Scott," she said, her eyes bright, "you're going to have a black eye for your wedding!"

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"Some day is a long time off," Sharon murmured

GAMBLER'S GIRL

By Cy Kees

GOOD MORNING, Mr. Evans," the girl said to *him*. Respectable women sometimes looked at him curiously, or oddly. Most of them gave him harsh glares and passed on without a word. But they didn't give him a bright smile and say, "Good morning, Mr. Evans."

She was the new preacher's daughter, and her name was Sharon Sanderson. That was all he knew about her, really. And now she stood waiting, a hint of a twinkle in her warm brown eyes. Tod Evans shifted uneasily.

"You sure you haven't got the wrong

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WHEN A GAMBLER is charmed by the warm brown eyes of the preacher's daughter, something has to give

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person?" he said finally. "You know who I am?"

"Yes, you're Tod Evans, and you're a card dealer at the High Ace Saloon," she said. The quick smile lighted her face again. "Right?"

"Uh-huh," he acknowledged, after a moment's hesitation. "Go high as the sky and we'll be right up there to cover you."

Her chin reached even higher than it was already, and he knew he'd chosen the wrong remark. "A brave slogan, Mr. Evans," she said coolly. "And when they do bet, you beat them. It doesn't matter if you have to cheat, or get their senses numbed with liquor first. You—"

"Hey, hold on a minute," Evans cut in, frowning. "I've never dealt a crooked card in my life."

"And I suppose you let only sober players into the game."

"Well, I don't sniff their breaths first," he said sarcastically. "If they're too brewed up to play, they ought to go home to bed where they belong."

"I'm sure you're always the first to suggest that," she snapped right back. Little slivers of fire flashed across her deep brown eyes. "So far, five persons have come to our house late at night, drunk and penniless from being in that saloon."

Evans shrugged. "I suppose they told how they'd been hobbled to the bar and couldn't get away."

"It isn't as funny as you seem to think it is," she flared. Then, with an obvious effort, she calmed down. "I didn't mean to start an argument. I'm Sharon Sanderson, and Dad asked me to talk to you about taking another job of some kind."

"So this is how he does it!" Now Evans started to understand why Sam Sanderson, the preacher, had had so much success in his drive to wipe out vice in Twin Buttes. Instead of depending solely on the pulpit, the preacher sent his winsome daughter out into the byways. Evans grinned. "Your old man must figure that honey'll draw more barflies than preaching."

Her smooth face flushed, but her eyes stayed level with his. "You really aren't being funny, Mr. Evans. A lot of people here have been won to our side, and only because we're trying to help them."

"You aren't kidding, you've won them over." Evans started recalling how hard the High Ace Saloon had been hit. "Eight percentage girls quit, leaving us only two—and those are homely ones. We've changed bartenders three times in the last two weeks. And Gorilla Jacks took off without even collecting his pay. He was the best bouncer we ever had."

"And all of them are now employed at useful jobs," the girl stated. "Dad feels that men take jobs in places like that saloon because they've no other place to go, nothing else to do. We find them respectable, useful jobs, and much more often than not, they're glad to get them."

"I see," Evans said. It seemed like an effective if simple method. "What did you find that Gorilla Jacks could do?"

"His name is not Gorilla," she said quietly. "It's Gregory. Gregory Jacks has opened a woodlot on Crooked Creek. And from his last report, he's doing very well at it."

"Well, that's an inspiring story, to say the least." Evans grinned. "I didn't think Gorilla had brains enough to recognize a tree, much less make a straight cut. You sure he hasn't got a still out there?"

TAKING a deep breath, she bit her lower lip. She had a nice wide mouth, sweet and tempting. She ignored his question, studying him instead of answering.

"So far, Mr. Jacks has shown a great deal more sense than you have," she retorted finally. "So far, that is. What did you do before you started dealing cards, Mr. Evans?"

The question brought back memories he'd been trying to forget, but he tried not to let it show on his face. Rubbing his chin, Evans concentrated on appearing thoughtful. "Guess I can't remember that far back," he said blandly.

She eyed his tall, rangy figure. "You look strong enough to get out and work. What do you think you'd like to do?"

Evans considered the question. At the same moment his eyes settled again on

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her cute, upturned face. He smiled. "I think I'd like to kiss a nice little girl who's going around asking nosy questions."

It was a devastating answer. Flinching, Sharon Sanderson flushed a brick red, and this time she couldn't face him down, even though she tried. She swallowed once and seemed ready to make a retort. Then, tilting her chin, she walked past him and on down the sidewalk.

Laughing, Evans turned to watch her flight. "Hey," he called after her, "lay off our bartenders, will you, please? We're having a heck of a time finding new ones."

She acted as if she didn't hear him, but Evans knew she had. In her bright gingham dress, she certainly improved the scenery on the drab street. Evans knew she was trying to move as modestly as possible. With her figure, he thought, it must be quite an effort. Then she disappeared into a store down the street.

Her passing out of sight left him with an odd feeling of loneliness. And some of the sparkle seemed to go out of the air, although the sun was still blazing down out of a clear sky. Slowly Evans shook his head.

No doubt about it, Sharon Sanderson had what it took to sneak into a man's heart. She was a beauty, she was decent, and she had a certain spirit seldom found in a sheltered female. Evans threw off the thoughts and moved on toward the restaurant.

It didn't matter much how he felt; he couldn't change. The club Baldy Pike held over his head would force him to go on dealing the cards. As owner of the High Ace Saloon, Baldy would never let him go back to being a lawyer.

Moodily, Evans ordered his meal. While he forked the tasteless food, his mind wandered back to that one big decision which had changed his whole life. . . .

He'd been working in his office that morning at Smith's Junction when someone brought the news—his younger brother, Billy, had been arrested, accused of murder. Hurrying to the jail, Tod Evans knew there'd been a mistake.

Billy was a wild kid, and had been slow to mature. But he was good-hearted too, and he'd never kill a man. Evans had to admit the evidence looked bad.

Billy had been with the wrong bunch during a killing, and drunk, and the others had pinned it on him. Evans took Billy's case and did everything in his power to get the kid freed. But young Billy Evans was sentenced to hang.

Late into the night after the trial, Tod Evans sat in his law office, fighting a battle with himself. What he intended as a last resort was breaking the law, it would make him an outcast. But he couldn't let them hang an innocent man. Not when it was his own brother.

The next day he tried to appeal the case. The judge was sorry, but the evidence had been substantial, the jury fair. There would be no appeal. Really scared then, Tod Evans talked to Sheriff Hathaway.

Hathaway was sorry too. He'd always liked Billy, he said, but he had no other choice than to uphold the law.

That night Tod Evans sneaked into the jail. Overpowering the sheriff, he turned the kid loose. They parted trails somewhere in the night, and Tod Evans rode fast and far. . . .

HIS FIRST DAYS in Twin Buttes, he had gone back to gambling, running the games in Baldy Pike's High Ace Saloon. As soon as enough time had passed to make it safe, he was going to establish his law business in Twin Buttes.

But somehow Baldy Pike had found out about the charge awaiting him back at Smith's Junction. Baldy had held it over his head for over two years now, and the future looked long and bleak.

The restaurant door slammed shut, jerking him out of his thoughts. Evans glanced up. Her soft chin squared in determination, Sharon Sanderson was walking toward his table. When she got close, Evans stood up. He smiled a welcome, and she returned it, gloriously.

"Dad always said I should watch my temper," she said, her brown eyes sparkling. "I do owe you an apology, Mr. Evans."

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"Maybe you've got one coming too." Evans glanced at an empty chair, back at her. "If you think your reputation can stand the strain, I'd like to have you sit with me."

"I haven't time now." She gave him a long, level look. "But if you want to take a walk this afternoon, I'd like to talk to you again."

Evans knew he should say no. No matter what argument she used, he would have to refuse her offer of work. But the thought of walking, of being alone with her, was too tempting. Smiling, Evans nodded. "I'll meet you here."

Outside, the day seemed brighter again, and Evans started anticipating the time he would spend with Sharon. Going down the single street, he turned in at the High Ace Saloon.

The interior was gloomy, and Baldy Pike stood alone behind the bar, his bulldog face settled in a black scowl. Evans grinned. "How's business, Baldy?" he asked cheerfully, knowing it wasn't worth a thin dime.

Baldy growled once, but didn't say anything. Baldy had been brooding more and more of late as his business fell off and the Preacher Sanderson continued to reform his help. There were lean days ahead for the High Ace Saloon, and Baldy Pike knew it.

"Heard what happened to Gorilla Jacks," Evans said, needling the squat saloon owner. "He's got a wood lot now."

"You just wait till winter," Baldy growled. "He'll be back here looking for a warm place to rest his fat carcass."

"Probably he'll be back to sell you a winter's wood," Evans remarked blandly. "You know, I used to make wood. Maybe Gorilla would take me in for halfs."

"You used to do some things the law didn't like, too, don't forget that." Baldy's green eyes were glittering, and his smile looked wolfish. "You try to run out on me and I'll have you in jail so fast you'll think you been there all along."

Baldy Pike always had the high trump there, Evans thought ruefully. He went over to the poker table and idly riffled the deck. A few punchers wandered in for drinks and left again. Early in the afternoon, Evans headed for the door.

After a short wait in the restaurant, Sharon came in. Dressed in simple jeans and a blouse, she still managed to look like a princess. Her dark hair looked freshly brushed, and she smiled as if she was looking forward to this walk.

They followed the road out of town and then turned off on a trail that led to Crooked Creek. The water was low for early fall, but the grass on the banks was still green. They sat there for a long time in a companionable silence, saying nothing. Sitting beside him, Sharon stirred and sat farther in front, so she could watch his face.

"Tod, you haven't changed your mind about quitting that job?"

Evans thought of the hold Baldy Pike had on him. Not looking at her, he shook his head.

"Do you think some time maybe you will?"

He couldn't even give her that much encouragement. Glancing up, Evans surprised her brown eyes on him, warm and deep. Reaching out, he took one of her warm slim hands, "I'm sorry, Sharon," he said quietly. "I guess I won't."

"You don't ever want to do anything but deal cards?" She paused, waiting, but he didn't answer. "Do you like gambling?"

"I hate gambling," he said, through set teeth. He was telling her too much, he knew, and guessed he'd better keep his mouth shut.

"I knew it!" she said, and there was a note of deep satisfaction in her voice. "Tod, do you owe Baldy Pike some kind of debt?"

SHARON was getting uncomfortably close to the right answer. Sighing, Evans stood up, knowing he dared not let her probe farther. Taking her hand, he led the way back to Twin Buttes. When they reached the front of the High Ace Saloon, he said good-by and then watched her walk alone up the street.

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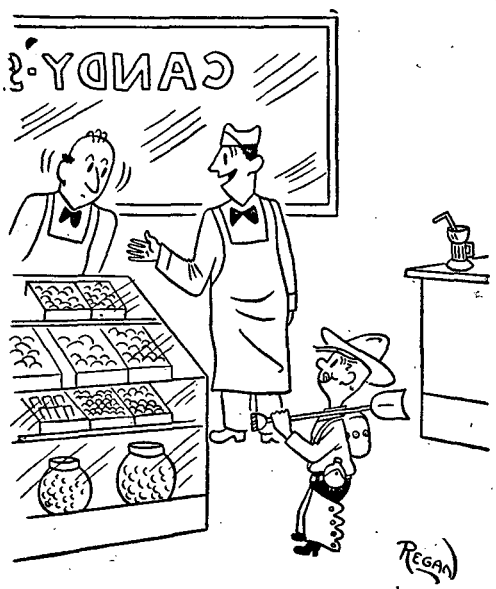
Baldy Pike stood near the door, a worried scowl on his face. "Say, wasn't that the preacher's daughter you were talking to?"

Evans nodded. "I would've brought her in and introduced her, but she never drinks before supper."

"Just see that you don't get too thick with her, that's all."

Evans didn't answer that. He glanced around the nearly empty saloon. The two



"He wants to know if you'll grubstake him!"

remaining percentage girls were sitting glumly at a corner table. Two riders and one barfly stood at the bar. "Business is sure booming, Baldy," Evans remarked. He grinned. "You keep getting crowds like this and you'll have to expand."

"Don't worry, they'll all be back when they get their fill of that preaching," Baldy muttered. But he didn't sound so sure of himself now. "If they don't I'm sure going to be hunting one preacher to peel."

Evans studied the burly saloon owner. The remark made him uneasy, and he resolved not to heckle Baldy about the lack of customers. If Baldy went on the warpath, there would be serious trouble. And he didn't want any trouble for Sharon, even if it did come through her old man.

He loitered around the saloon all evening, but couldn't get enough players to make a game. The next day Sharon Sanderson found him again in the restaurant, and they had another walk. Before the week was over, they were spending every afternoon in the sunshine near Crooked Creek. And Tod Evans started living for the time he could spend with her.

Baldy Pike grew more silent and morose. Once Evans caught him glaring across the street, a murderous gleam in his green eyes. Following Baldy's gaze, Evans saw the tall, rawboned Preacher Sanderson walking down the street.

It looked as if Baldy Pike was going to have to fight the preacher, or close up. Business was getting steadily worse. The next Sunday, Evans went to one of the preacher's meetings.

The services were already started when he reached the ramshackle church. Sneaking inside, Evans headed for the last seat. It was already full of persons with familiar faces—faces he had seen often over the bar at the High Ace Saloon. Looking a trifle sheepish, they crowded over and made room for him.

Evans was mildly surprised to find that the preacher's quiet talk made sense. The next day there was a happy glow in Sharon Sanderson's warm brown eyes.

"I saw you at the meeting," she explained. She didn't say more until they reached their spot on Crooked Creek. Then came the question he dreaded to hear. "Have you changed your mind yet, Tod?"

Evans shook his head. Often he was tempted to tell her of his past life, but he could never force himself to do it. Evans studied her, knowing he loved her and not daring to say it.

"You might warn your dad to be on the lookout for Baldy Pike," he told her. "Baldy hasn't been very happy about the attendance at the saloon lately."

Sharon didn't seem to be worried. She

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only smiled. "Dad can take care of himself," she said. "It's you I'm worried about."

"Really worried?" he asked, trying to tease and making a poor job out of it.

Sharon looked right at him, and she nodded. Her eyes glistened and she blinked hard. Then Evans knew, and the knowledge made him feel humble and ashamed and helpless—she loved him too. Sharon stood up, gazing toward the heavily wooded area up Crooked Creek.

"Let's walk up and see how Mr. Jacks is coming with his wood yard." She smiled. "Maybe he'll give you a part-time job piling wood."

"In five minutes I could pile all the wood Gorilla Jacks would cut in ten years," Evans remarked, remembering the hulking bouncer's laziness. "He probably gave it up long ago."

"His name is Gregory, not Gorilla," Sharon reminded him. "And you might be in for a surprise too."

ALMOST three miles it was, and with his first sight of Gorilla's camp, Evans was surprised. Gorilla had laid out a neat lot near Crooked Creek, with a big tent pitched on a flat knoll. The sharp, repeated cracks of an ax sounded from the timbered hillside. And all over the area were square, uniform piles of wood, with rounded piles of brush beside each one.

Sharon seemed to be waiting for his comment, and Evans tried to think of one which would fit. But it was no use. No words he knew would describe the change of habits in Gorilla Jacks.

Gorilla must have spotted them, because he came off the hillside, the woodsman's ax over his wide shoulder. As he approached, he wiped honest sweat off his forehead.

Evans stared. The only time he'd ever seen Gorilla sweat in the High Ace Saloon was one time when the burly bouncer had dropped into a tipsy sleep too close to the stove. When Gorilla came close, Evans eyed the healthy brown on his face, the wide grin.

Stopping in front of Sharon, Gorilla tugged off his hat. No doubt about it, Evans thought, Gorilla was a changed man.

"I never knew what I was missing," Gorilla told him later, when they were seated in his camp. "There never was a luckier day than when the preacher raked me over the coals."

Evans caught Sharon smiling, and he knew now why she had brought him here. She wanted to see if he would follow Gorilla's good example.

"Yes, sir, this is the life," Gorilla went on. Pulling out a stubby pipe, he stuffed and lit it. "The work wears a man out. But in the evening, he can sit peaceful and quiet and enjoy the world." Gorilla waved his pipe at the piles of cut wood on the hillside. "And I can look up there and see what I've done. Back at the High Ace, all I'd ever see of my work is a couple of busted heads. And then about the time I got off work I had to watch all the way home or one of them'd lean out of an alley and fetch me a lick alongside the head for my trouble. Evans, you ought to get outa there.

"If you need money, I might be able to help you out," Gorilla went on. "About the time I sell this wood, I won't know what to do with it all. One good drunk'd use it up, but—" Breaking off, Gorilla turned red and sneaked a glance at Sharon.

"But Mr. Jacks doesn't drink any more," Sharon finished gently.

"Just a short snort now and then when my bones ache of a morning," Gorilla mumbled, hopelessly honest and yet trying not to ruin the good impression he was making.

Sighing, Evans stood up. "Glad to see you're making out, Gorilla," he said heartily. "We've got to be going back, I guess."

Gorilla grinned. "Tell Baldy I ain't missed him yet. He claimed I'd be back in two days with my tongue hanging out a yard. Tell him this creek water sure beats his rotgut."

Evans laughed. He took Sharon's hand and led the way back toward Twin Buttes. When they were out of sight of the camp, her hand tightened on his, and he stopped.

"Tod—if you really feel it's all right to deal—" She broke off and he didn't look at her. "I mean, I—I don't want it to make any difference between us."

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Glancing at her, Evans saw the flush in her face, the misery in her dark eyes. The clean piny air touched his nostrils. The running water made soothing music. Turning, he held out his arms and Sharon brought the slender warmth of her body close to him.

With his face buried in the dark hair over her ear, the words came easily. "I used to be a lawyer, Sharon. I did something wrong and had to run. Baldy Pike knows it and he'll turn me in if I don't deal for him."

"Is—was it something terribly wrong?"

"In the eyes of the law, it would be. I'm afraid, Sharon. It might mean years of prison."

Sharon moved away, but she kept her hands on his shoulders while her eyes searched his. "Would that be worse than a life sentence at the High Ace Saloon?"

Evans shrugged. "Some day something'll happen and maybe I can get away from Baldy. Then, I hope—" He broke off, confused, but he knew the way he was looking at her gave him away more surely than any speech he could make. "I love you, Sharon. I hope I can marry you."

"Some day seems like an awfully long time off," she murmured, looking down at the ground.

"You mean you'd marry me, even—"

"Yes, darn it," she said fiercely. "I'd marry you even if you'd buy that horrible place."

That decided him. All the way back to Twin Buttes, Evans was silent, fearing what lay ahead. But he had no choice now. If he didn't give himself up, he wouldn't be able to resist marrying Sharon. And she'd never be happy married to a gambler. He had to turn himself in.

IT WAS almost dark when they got back to Twin Buttes. Baldy Pike scowled at him from the doorway of the High Ace Saloon. "Got a couple of drummers in here want to play." He gritted his teeth. "Been waiting for over an hour now. Get the hell in here and get your game started."

"I forgot to tell you, Mr. Pike," Evans said carefully, relishing this moment. "I'm not dealing for you any more."

"You're not—what?"

"I don't care much for cards," Evans said. "And the inside of your saloon smells bad. I'm not dealing for you any more."

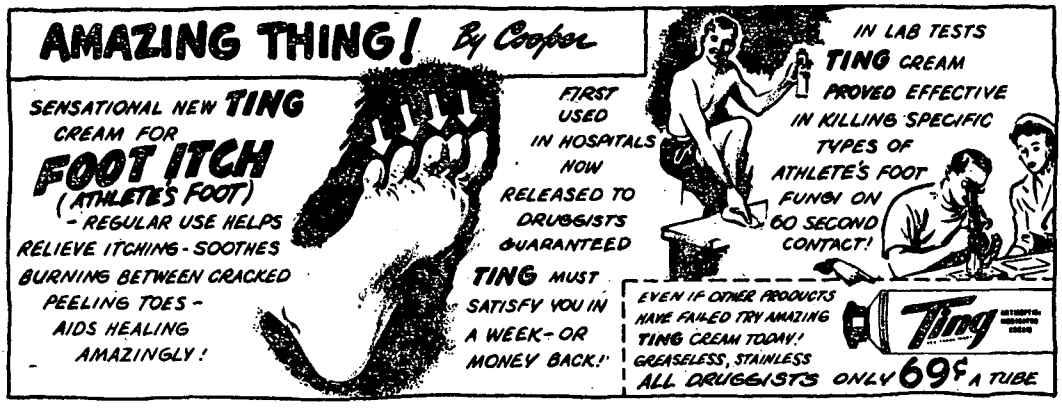
"Say, listen here," Baldy snarled. "You try that just once and I'll have you so far back in jail they'll—"

"If you want to report me, you'll have to hurry, Mr. Pike," Evans said, feeling wonderfully free for the first time in months. "I'm on my way now to send a telegram to the sheriff, telling him to come get me."

Baldy Pike paled. "So he got to you too, that dirty preaching son—"

Evans hurried Sharon past hearing distance of the blast of profanity which followed. Not hesitating, Evans walked alone to the telegraph office. The wizened agent was still there. Evans made out a telegram to Sheriff Hathaway at Smith's Junction, asking for instructions.

As soon as he left the office, he heard the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excitement in the Twin Buttes street. Suddenly scared, he hurried toward the noise.

If Baldy Pike had spotted the preacher while he was blazing with anger, he would tear the man to pieces. Nearing the scene, he saw the crowd across from the High Ace Saloon. Cursing, Evans charged into the group. He spied one of the former bartenders from the High Ace.

"What the hell happened?" he asked, scared sick of what the answer might be.

"Baldy took after Preacher Sanderson with that club he keeps for troublemakers. Foaming at the mouth almost, Baldy was."

Evans snapped, "Sanderson hurt bad?"

"Is Sanderson hurt?" The man laughed. "Hell, Baldy never touched him. Preacher got the club first swipe and then threw Baldy end over teakettle past the hitch-rail. He's got Baldy pinned there now, waiting for the sheriff."

Evans breathed a big sigh of relief. Backing off, he left the crowd. But a little later he saw the sheriff leading Baldy Pike toward the jail. At the same time he got a glimpse of the preacher talking to Sharon. When she left her father, he moved to head her off.

"Whew! I was scared," he told her. "I knew Baldy would try something."

Sharon smiled. "I told you not to worry about Dad." She glanced up the street to where the preacher's tall, gaunt figure was moving out of sight, and there was deep pride in her eyes. "For a long time he was with the Texas Rangers," she added.

Sharon turned her eyes to him then, and the question in them was plain.

"Yeah, I sent the telegram," Evans said quietly. "I should get an answer any time. Want to go to the office with me and wait?"

Seated in the dingy office, they both tensed every time the key started clicking. Each time they found out it wasn't for him, they exchanged worried glances and tried to relax. Finally the wizened agent turned to him.

"For you, Mr. Evans." He held out the slip.

"Thank you." Evans tried his best to stay calm, but his fingers shook when he took it. Sharon moved close, and they read it together.

NO CHARGE AGAINST YOU HERE. REAL MURDERER CONFESSED AND WAS CONVICTED. BILLY IS BACK RUNNING THE BUTCHER SHOP: WHY NOT VISIT. I OWE YOU ONE WHACK ON THE HEAD.
SHERIFF HATHAWAY

Evans couldn't jerk his eyes from the paper. The print blurred in front of his eyes, but he kept looking at it. Then the paper dropped from his fingers. Slowly he turned to look at Sharon. There were tears in her eyes too. It grew very silent in the office.

The agent shuffled. "Hope it's not bad news, Mr. Evans."

Evans grinned and he hugged Sharon. "No, sir," he said huskily. "The best news in the world."

"It's wonderful," Sharon said. She smiled up at him. "Now you can start being a lawyer again."

"I sure will." Suddenly, Evans stared into space, thinking. "Hey, come on! We've got to make a run down to the jail."

She hurried with him to the door. "What do you want down there?"

"I'm a lawyer now, and there's just been a man arrested," Evans told her, starting down the street. "If I get there in time, maybe I can get Baldy Pike to be my first client."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Next Issue—a Review of 20th Century-Fox's

POWDER RIVER

Featuring RORY CALHOUN and CORINNE CALVET

Plus an Illustrated Personality Sketch of **BRODERICK CRAWFORD**

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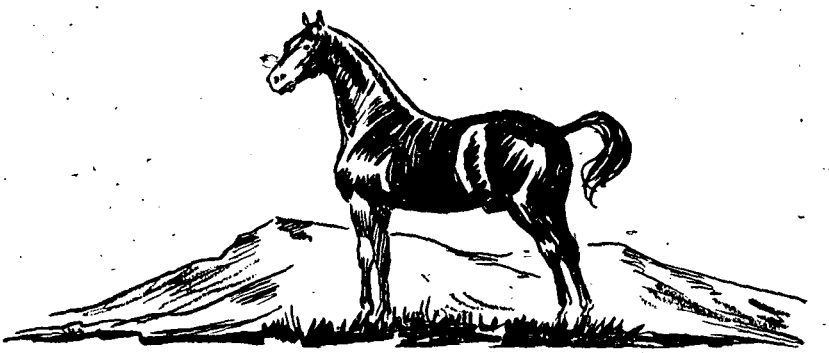
Wild Bunch Sentinel

By Ferris Weddle



The true—and tragic—story of a fabulous stallion

NO COW-COUNTRY campfire session is complete without a cougar story and one about a king stallion. Shrouded in the mists of legend, the wild horse leader was the phantom animal to make a cowboy's eyes glow and his heart pound. And usually he was just as elusive as a phantom.

My favorite wild horse story is the one about Silvertail. His story—with a truly tragic ending—has traveled so many shadowy trails that it has become as dim as the paths his shining hoofs followed.

Silvertail came into being in the mountains of southern and southwestern Idaho during the time when wagons were cutting ruts across nameless regions to reach Oregon country. His father, a palomino, was called the Golden Stallion, and he raided an Oregon-bound wagon train's cavvy to get Silvertail's mother, a beautiful thoroughbred Hambletonian.

Local cowboys had tried for years to capture the Golden Stallion who had once been the prize of a California *grande.* When, a few months after the stallion's raid on the train's horses, they saw a colt frisking beside the mare and the proud father, they redoubled their efforts to make the capture. But it didn't work. The Golden Stallion took his band further into the hills.

Months slipped into years, and one day a cowboy reported that a beautiful golden horse with long silver mane and tail was king of the Golden Stallion's band.

"The son has beaten his father and taken over," was the verdict; with the added comment, "what a battle that must have been! No horse has ever been able to whip the Golden Stallion."

Hard-riding cowpokes, hungry ropes ready, followed the elusive trail of Silvertail's band. He evaded all traps, his intelligence far surpassing his sire's. He was the eagle-eyed sentinel and protector of the wild bunch.

But civilization was pushing Silvertail's wild ones as more and more people came to the Northwest. A bad year of drought and famine pushed the stallion into going nearer his enemies.

One day a group of riders sighted his band not far from a waterhole which had been fenced to trap some half-wild cattle. With pagan yells and swinging ropes, the horse band was herded toward the hidden corral. Before Silvertail realized his danger, a stout rail corral held him. Perhaps he could have leaped to safety, but he

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stayed with his band, a snorting, trembling hulk of beautiful horse.

The better members of the stallion's band were taken out one by one, until finally only Silvertail, tightly held with ropes, was left. Even bound, he fought like a devil—his hoofs flashing, his teeth bared, his rolling eyes daring anyone to approach.

"Leave him alone for a while and he'll change his tune," the cowboys decided.

They were wrong. Three days later, without food or water, Silvertail still battled. He refused all offers of food and drink and his sides became gaunt.

"Get Jim Jason. He can tame any animal that ever breathed," one cowboy suggested.

The rest agreed. Although Jim wasn't much of a rancher, he was a good hand with animals. He always took his time with them, gentling them slow and easy.

JIM'S EYES gleamed when he saw Silvertail. He had long wanted this prize. Someone had beat him to the draw, but at least he would have the pleasure of taming the wild one the way he should be tamed.

Slowly, patiently, Jim Jason tried his magic with Silvertail. But the stallion, for another two days, refused food and water. The horseman left the inducements handy, and sat on the corral fence by the hour. The horse must connect the man and the food. Eventually the quivering nose touched the water and Silvertail drank deeply, gustily. Then he ate some of the hay. Jim let out a sigh of relief, smiling.

Using the gentling method, Jim gradually got the wild stallion to the point where he would eat out of Jim's hand. He taught him to lead first, using a hackamore, then he put blankets on the shining back, and eventually the heavier weight of a saddle was put on with the cinch straps loose; next they were tightened; and then weight was added.

One day Jim Jason eased himself into the saddle and Silvertail, after a few curious nuzzles at his master's leg, trotted about the corral. Later, when the time was right, Jim invited the cowboy owners of the horse to witness the taming of Silvertail. One of the more daring cowpokes wanted to try to ride the horse. Silvertail bared his teeth and tried to cave in the cowhand's head with a flashing of hind feet.

It appeared that Silvertail was to be a one-man horse unless he were castrated, so this was done.

Two weeks or so later, Jim was invited to a party and proudly he rode his golden horse—for it looked as if he would be the owner after all. None of the others wanted an outlaw on their hands.

A wide irrigation ditch wound across the pasture through which a group of cowhands, including Jim, approached the house. It had to be either jumped or gone around. None of the cowboys were willing to try it.

"Bet Silvertail can't make it, either," a cowboy ribbed Jim.

Jim looked at the broad ditch and without speaking turned Silvertail about and started him for the ditch at a dead run. It seemed that Silvertail was not going to make it without more speed, so Jim lightly touched his quirt to the animal. The sting, which he had never experienced, startled and terrified Silvertail, and increased his nervousness to the point of fury.

He leaped the ditch, but once across, he began to buck—great, jarring, spine-breaking jumps which were so unexpected Jim Jason was flung from the saddle. Silvertail's hoofs hit him, and as though possessed of something evil, the horse pawed the unmoving form of the man. As the alarmed cowboys urged their mounts forward, the wild one whirled, leaped the ditch and was off, his mane and tail flying.

Jim Jason was dead—his life ended by the horse he had loved. Yet the cowboys knew he would be the first to exonerate the leader of the wild bunch.

Silvertail rejoined his old band. But here was tragedy, too. The stallion who had taken over ignored him, as did the mares. The leadership could not go to a horse who was, after all, no longer a stallion.

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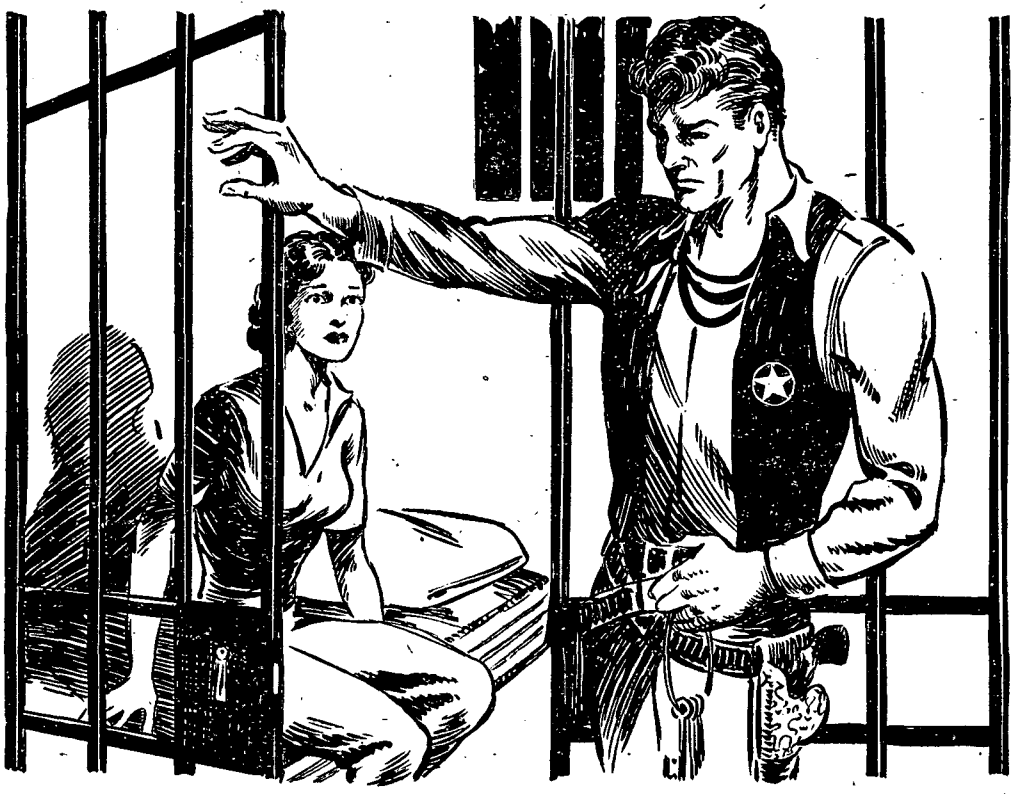

He turned from the cell, his shoulders slumped

Jailhouse Built for Two

By Reede Walker

PEGGY FOUND HERSELF outside the law . . . when what she really wanted was to be in its arms!

WHEN THE WHISKY started to run low, Peggy Tomlinson knew it was nearing the time for another holdup. She studied the scrawny figure curled on the floor near the black cookstove, and she sighed. It was bad enough having an outlaw for a father. What made it worse was that he always expected her to help him.

"Along about this time in the spring, the ranchers are looking for extra hands, Dad," she suggested hopefully, to his dozing figure. "Maybe if you'd look around—"

Grunting, Jug Tomlinson twisted his waspish body to a more comfortable position in the heat coming from the open oven door. He yawned, scratched his back and then relaxed again. His whole attitude said plainly that if there was going to be any ranch work done this spring, he would be long miles away from it.

Sadly, Peggy shook her head. His reaction was the same as it had always been. The only value he saw in work was that it

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produced something for him to steal. Stepping around his sleeping figure, Peggy started to make supper.

The fatty salt pork spattered hot grease. Jug Tomlinson twitched a couple of times, then sat up abruptly, a peevish scowl on his whiskery face.

"Seems like every time I'm about to get a little sleep, you find a way to ruin it," he grumbled. "There was no hurry to get the supper ready just to spatter me with hot grease."

"I'm hungry," Peggy said. "Besides, all you've done all day is sleep."

"I reckon that's my business," he snarled right back.

"Then it's no wonder we haven't got any money," she said, but under her breath, so he couldn't hear her.

Still grumbling, Jug wandered over to the rough pine table. Taking a long draw from the whisky jug, he waited for her to serve the meal. As usual, it was only salt pork and beans. Peggy waited for him to start growling about it, but this evening her father seemed deep in thought. He forked the food absently, his faded blue eyes staring into space.

"I'm getting mighty sick of the way we live here," he muttered finally. "Roof leaks, stove won't draw, and my belly turns over every time another bean hits it. It's time to make a change."

Peggy sighed. She wanted to say that the roof could be patched, the soot unloaded from the chimney, and that a few hours' work a day would keep them stocked with decent food. But she didn't. Moodily, she stared at her empty plate. It wouldn't do any good anyhow. She'd tried that before with no results.

"The whole trouble is, we ain't been robbing in the right places," he went on. He gazed again into space. "Now I know of a nice fat bank over to Hunterton—"

"Bank?" Peggy echoed, stiffening suddenly in her seat. "You don't mean rob a bank?"

"No, I mean make a big deposit of money," Jug sneered sarcastically. "We've got so much of it lying around here, we've got to get rid of some."

PEGGY swallowed hard. This was going too far, and she knew it. So far he had been content with small jobs. They had rustled a few stray cows, or broken into stores at night, and sometimes even a house. But the two of them would never get away with robbing a bank, particularly a fat one like he was talking about. She shifted uneasily.

"Maybe we ought to look for a steer to rustle," she said timidly. It made her feel guilty to make the suggestion, but if she could get Jug's mind on meat, he might forget about the bank.

"If you steal one, you might as well steal a herd, tight as those ranchers been lately," he said. "They watch every cow like it was the only one they had."

"Then why don't we really make a change?" Peggy asked. "We'll move to town and I'll get a job myself to help out. We'll—"

"Hell with that," Jug cut in brusquely. "No daughter of mine's going to have to work while she's under my roof."

Peggy studied his scowling face. "It seems to me that it would be better than helping to steal things. Besides, I'd like to get into town where I could—well, meet someone."

Jug glared. "There's still plenty of time for that. Pretty as you are, you won't have any trouble hooking a man."

Hot blood rose to her face, and Peggy stared back to her plate. In a way her father was right. She did seem to be able to attract men. Her blue eyes were wide and deep, and her face was cute, if not beautiful. Her figure was well formed, even if it was too skinny from not getting the right things to eat. Jug was grumbling again.

"When I did bring some boys out here for you to meet, you wouldn't even be sociable with them."

"Oh, *those*," Peggy said contemptuously, and refused even to talk about them.

On one of his weekly binges, Jug had brought home a couple of the young hellions he'd been drinking with during the evening. When they had seen her, their eyes had bulged out half an inch, and they'd had

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trouble saying anything with the way they'd been licking their lips. She'd been about as warm to them as a bucket of ice water down the back, and they had never returned for a second visit.

Jug stood up. "When we get that bank knocked over, you won't have a thing to worry about," he stated, with finality. "You'll be able to get nice clothes and live like a young female should."

In a worried silence Peggy did the dishes. There was no use arguing with him when he used that tone of voice. But she had to think of some way to talk him out of robbing the bank. Everything they had done before was small potatoes compared to that kind of a job.

When she finished the dishes, Jug was snoring in his corner bunk. Peggy stared helplessly at his sprawled figure. Maybe she should just pack up and leave him, she thought. But she had speculated about that a thousand times before, and she always stuck with him. And she knew why.

When she had been born, her mother had died, and with the loss of his wife, Jug had been cast adrift. He had been a respectable businessman then, but he had soon wandered outside the law, slipping gradually from shiftlessness to petty thievery. With a sudden glow of tenderness, Peggy slipped over and kissed his cheek.

In a way it was her fault that he no longer cared to try. Her birth had cost him the one person who would have helped him build a better life. Quietly Peggy blew out the lamp and went to her own bed behind the blanket partition.

For a long time she lay wide awake in the darkness, thinking about the man she hoped she would meet some day. Although she was only twenty-two, it seemed like she'd been waiting all her life.

DURING breakfast, Jug was grouchier than ever, not even becoming cheerful enough to growl. Eyes narrowed, slouching, he ate his food more absently than he had the night before.

"I don't see a lick of sense in waiting," he said suddenly. "We'll head up to Hunterton today."

His words shocked her, and Peggy tried hard to think of something to say. "Maybe if we'd wait a few days, something might turn up," she managed finally.

Jug glared. "Yeah, a big bankroll might jump right out of the ground and land on our front step. Hell with it. We're going."

Jug was silent on the long ride to Hunterton, leaving Peggy with her own gloomy thoughts. They found a deserted cabin a few miles from the town and moved in. If possible, it was even more rundown than the one they had left. But Jug cheered up.

"As nice a hide-out as we could hope to find," he stated, stuffing rat-eaten rags in the broken window panes. "Never thought we'd hit it this lucky. We can live good and snug here while we plan this job."

Although she tried to ignore her conscience, Peggy couldn't get into the spirit of it. What he was planning was wrong, and foolish and dangerous too. At the best they would be hunted fugitives, living guiltily on stolen money.

But while they unsaddled and unpacked the horses, Jug seemed to grow more determined than ever to go through with it. When they had carried the packs inside, he turned to her.

"We'll be needing some grub and—" He glanced at the whisky jug which he had carted along. Carefully he counted the money in his worn wallet. "If we didn't have to spend so much on grub, we'd have plenty left." A sly grin parted his face. "You suppose you could talk some grocery clerk into giving us credit?"

Peggy bristled. "I don't imagine I could," she said. "I've had to lie so much lately, I don't think anyone will believe me any more."

Her words didn't jar Jug a bit. His grin widened. "If you'd just bat those blue eyes once or twice, he'd fall over backward—"

"I refuse to ask for credit when I know we'll never pay the bill," Peggy said hotly, biting a sudden quiver out of her lips. "If you want credit, you'll have to go yourself."

"I would, but I might be known in Hunterton," he said, scratching his tangled hair. "Don't you remember, we robbed a hardware store there a couple years ago."

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Peggy did remember then. It had been one of the first times that her father had insisted she go along and help. But they hadn't gotten much. Some small change and the .44 Colt which Jug carried in the holster at his hip. Jug handed her the money.

"Just to play safe, get the jug filled first," he said. "Then whatever you got left, you can use for grub."

Peggy nodded obediently. For years now the whisky jug had been given first consideration when they were short of money, and it no longer bothered her. Saddling one of the horses, she headed for Hunterton.

The sun was settling close to the mountains in the west when she reached the small town. It looked peaceful, and she stifled the pleasant feeling of coming to a place where people would be friendly, where she would be welcomed. Peggy sighed. Her purpose here would do nothing to endear her to the citizens. They probably wouldn't cotton to bank robbers, female or not.

Balancing the big jug on the front of the saddle, she rode up the single street. In the second block she spied the bank, the finest looking building in town. Peggy stiffened guiltily and looked away again.

"Well, well, look who came to visit us," said a voice from behind her.

PEGGY'S HEART beat wildly, even before she looked around to see the owner of it. His tone was deep and exciting and interested. She turned in the saddle and looked into the warmest pair of gray eyes she had ever seen. He grinned, a wide, friendly grin.

"I hope you need some help of some kind," he said eagerly. "I'm the most willing volunteer you'll ever find."

Her eyes wandered down past his wide shoulders, and fastened on the star pinned to the left side of his chest. Quick fear replaced the pleasant feeling inside of her. This was the one man she should stay far away from.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said gently then, starting to back away. "But you being a stranger here, I thought you might need a hand."

"I—No, thank you," she stammered. She forced a smile. "But it was nice of you to offer, anyhow."

Right away, the way his eyes lighted again, Peggy knew she'd made a mistake. She should have let him keep backing away. But now he came right up to her horse.

"Sheriff Sandy Neal at your service, if you change your mind and want anything." He smiled. "What's your name?"

"Peggy Tomlinson," she blurted. As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew she'd made her second mistake. If her name was known here, it would be sure to have an unsavory smack. But he didn't seem to notice anything wrong. He was too busy seeing how she looked. Finally, he motioned to the crock jug.

"Let me get the vinegar," he said.

"Not vinegar," Peggy said, swallowing. "Whisky."

"Oh." Sheriff Sandy Neal shifted a little, and he rehitched the twin sixguns which flanked his lean lips. "Is it for your dad or for your—" he looked very sober now— "your husband?"

"I'm not married," Peggy said quickly. Her face grew hot. "I mean it's for—" Her voice broke off. She shouldn't tell him about her father, or he might get suspicious. Peggy evaded his questioning eyes. "It's for me."

Sandy scratched his head. "Gee, gal, you must have a powerful thirst. I'll get it filled and bring it back here."

"Wait. Here's the money," she said, digging into her jeans' pocket. He didn't argue about taking it, and Peggy was thankful for that. Swinging the big jug over his right shoulder, he moved down the street toward the nearest saloon.

Watching his broad back until it disappeared through the door, Peggy went to the general store and bought food with the little money she had left.

When she returned, Sheriff Sandy Neal was waiting with the jug of whisky. After she had mounted, he handed it up to her.

"Thank you very much," Peggy said, smiling and trying to look as dignified as possible while balancing the big jug in front of her.

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"Nothing at all." He grinned. "Peggy, will I see you again?"

From the tone of his voice, her answer meant a lot to him. Peggy nodded. "I think so," she said, and reined her horse around.

"Well, I hope so." Glancing once at the whisky jug, he waved her on. "Stay sober now."

Peggy hid her smile until she had passed on down the street. All the way out of town she sensed Sheriff Sandy Neal's eyes following her.

AFTER he had downed five or six shots of whisky, Jug grew mellow and talkative. Grinning, he stretched his scrawny frame in front of the stove.

"This'll fix us up right until we get our hands on that bank money," he said happily. "Tomorrow you can go in and get the lay of the land. Find out when there's only one or two in the bank and when the sheriff makes his rounds. Then all we'll have to do is sneak in the back way and make our haul."

At the mention of the sheriff, Peggy's heart beat faster. "I saw the sheriff in town today," she said carefully.

"Good, then you'll know him. What'd he look like?"

"I don't think we ought to take a chance robbing the bank. He's got mean eyes and a big black beard," she said, remembering Sheriff Sandy Neal's warm gray eyes and friendly grin. "And he acts dangerous too."

"Hah!" Jug snorted, slapping the .44 on his hip. "I've taken meaner ones'n he'll turn out to be."

Peggy sighed. It looked like there was no way to talk him out of it. She wondered again if she ought to refuse to help. But somehow she couldn't do it. Besides, if she didn't help, Jug would try it himself, and that would be all the more dangerous. Trying to forget her worries, she turned her thoughts to Sandy. She was still thinking about him when she went to sleep that night.

After giving her instructions the next morning, Jug went back to his whisky. All the way into town, Peggy hoped she'd see Sandy again, even while she dreaded the thought of it. If only he didn't have that star pinned on his chest, she thought. Or, even better, if only she was on the right side of the law. In fact, right inside the arms of the law. Smiling, Peggy reined her horse up Hunterton's main street.

There was nobody on the sidewalk. Although she was a little disappointed, Peggy breathed a sigh of relief. For what she had to do this morning, it would be far better if Sheriff Sandy Neal didn't show his handsome face at all.

After talking five minutes with a young cashier at the bank, she had all the information she needed. And she was sure she had aroused no suspicion. The cashier had been too sheepish and flustered by her smile even to realize what he was saying.

Leaving the bank, Peggy sensed a figure hovering closeby. She turned and looked into Sandy's glowing gray eyes.

"Sure glad to see you back again," he said, with a grin. "Fact is, I hope you'll make a habit of it."

"I'd like to," she said truthfully. "But I'm afraid I won't be around here long."

Sandy sobered fast. "Where you staying now?"

Her heart pounded, and Peggy didn't know what to answer. If she was too evasive, he would get suspicious. But she

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didn't dare tell him where she was living, or he might be tempted to make a visit. And liquored up as he'd be, Jug would start throwing lead. Finally, she waved vaguely, taking in about three points of the compass.

"Oh, out there," she said.

"That sure is nice to know," he said dryly. "If you ever run into trouble, I'll know exactly where to go."

"I never get into trouble," she said quickly, feeling heat rise to her cheeks.

He stepped closer—uncomfortably, pleasantly close. "It seems to me you'd have all kinds of trouble keeping the boys away," he said softly. There was a long pause. "Peggy, why don't you ever look at me?"

Peggy swallowed hard. "I—I guess I'm a little afraid of you, that's all," she said. Her voice was unsteady. "I mean, you're so—kind of—" Her voice trailed off. "Oh, darn, I don't know."

"Maybe if you knew me better, you could find out." He reached out, touched her hand. "There's a dance in town tonight. Please, would you go with me?"

Peggy hesitated. Then she nodded. "I guess so, if you want me to."

"Do I want you to go?" He chuckled. "I guess I want you to more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

"Then I'll go." Peggy glanced up to see if he was still looking at her. He was—a close, penetrating look. She took a deep breath. "There's just one thing," she added. "I'll have to come and go home by myself."

"You'll be safe alone?"

Peggy nodded. "You won't have to worry."

"Then I'll meet you here, around eight," he said. He sounded as if he was already looking forward to it. "And thanks a million, Peggy."

WHEN SHE reached the cabin again, Peggy started thinking of ways to break the news to her father. First she buttered him up with the information she had gotten at the bank. Jug seemed pleased. Finally she got around to her date with Sheriff Neal.

"I met a very nice man in town," she said, not looking at him. "He asked me to go to the dance tonight, and I—I said I would."

Jug grunted, and when she looked up, a dark frown lined his face. "Don't like the sound of that," he muttered. "Don't think you'd better go."

"I'm going," Peggy said, with such firmness that she surprised herself. She walked away before he could argue with her.

Jug grumbled and worked on the whisky a while before he reopened the argument. "What kind of a bird is this you're going to dance with?"

"He's the sheriff."

"Sheriff!" Jug bawled, rearing out of his seat. He stood for a moment, breathing hard. "You think I'll let you go to the dance with a damned lawdog?"

"Sure you will." Peggy smiled, a smile that was her own secret. "That's the best way there is to get the information you want."

"Oh." Jug lasped into silence. He took an extra long drink, as if he needed it to get over the shock. "Thought for a minute there you might be getting moony over one of those tin stars."

Peggy didn't answer. But while she made dinner, she was singing inwardly at the thought of dancing with Sandy Neal. And the hours dragged until it was time to go.

"Now you be careful," Jug warned, when she was leaving. "Don't you be talking when you should have your ears open."

"No, I won't," Peggy said meekly, so there wouldn't be any argument. "I never do."

Peggy hid her smile until she was on the way to Hunterton. It might be the danger of being so close to a sheriff that gave her the odd look, she thought. But she knew it wasn't. Except that this sheriff happened to be Sandy Neal. It was dark when she finally hurried her horse up Hunterton's main street.

Sandy walked out of the shadows by the bank building to meet her. His gray eyes were glowing, and there was relief in his wide grin.

"I was starting to get scared, you riding

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alone in the dark." He helped her dismount. "Or maybe I was just scared you'd changed your mind and wasn't coming at all," he said, his voice gentle.

"I wouldn't have missed this dance for anything," Peggy said. "It's been a terribly long time since I've been to one."

"We'll have to see what we can do about that," Sandy said softly. "I think we'll like dancing together."

They did. It was like a dream, being in Sandy's arms and hearing his gentle voice in her ear. Only she didn't dare dream about him. Every time she did, she felt the sheriff's star pressing against her, and it reminded her of how impossible the dreams were.

Later, Sandy drew her into the shadows by the bank building. His kiss was even more beautiful than the one in the dreams, much more. "Peggy, it seems like I've waited forever for you to come along," he said huskily. "Please tell me you're going to stay here."

Peggy said nothing. She wanted to reassure him, but she couldn't. Not as long as Jug insisted on trying to rob the Hunterton bank. "I'll try," she said finally, in a very small voice.

Sandy smiled. "Now you're going to let me take you home."

"But you can't," Peggy blurted. If Jug saw them coming, and saw the star on Sandy's chest, he would start shooting. Somehow she had to talk Sandy out of going. "You promised you'd let me go home alone."

"I know." He looked away at the ground. "Peggy, I can tell you don't trust me very much. I wish you would. There's no reason to be afraid of me."

They stood a moment in an uncomfortable silence. Then Peggy started backing away. She had already told him too much. And what she hadn't told him, Sandy would be figuring out for himself, very shortly.

"I'm sorry, Sandy," she said contritely. "I have to go home alone. Thanks a lot—for the most wonderful evening I've ever had." Turning, she mounted quickly and rode out of town.

THE FULL MOON was big and yellow, lighting the trail. But tonight the moon didn't seem close and friendly, as it usually did. It seemed distant and chilly. Peggy knew why, and she shook her head sadly.

After knowing Sandy, nothing would ever seem the same any more. She would be even more lonely now than she had been before she met him. Deep in moody thought, she reached the cabin.

Lamplight glowed dimly from the single unbroken window. After putting up her horse, Peggy walked slowly into the cabin.

From where he was sprawled in front of the stove, Jug grinned up at her. The air was thick with the harsh smell of raw whisky. Jug struggled to a sitting position.

"Took you long enough." He scowled. "You find out how we can keep away from the sheriff?"

Peggy stared at him for a long time, and then looked around at the rundown cabin. She thought of how friendly Sandy had been to her, and how kind. She could never use that against him. Hot tears slipped down her face.

"I—I'm not going to try to keep away from him," she said, forcing the words past her lips. "I'm going to go back and tell him to put me in jail."

"You're wha-at?" Jug reared off the floor. "I knew there was something ailing you all the time. What are you going to do that for?"

"Because I love him."

"Hah!" Jug snorted. "Suppose you think just because you look like you look, he'd be willing to forget about this. Well, sooner or later he's going to find out about you helping to rob the hardware store. Then where'll you be?"

"He'll find it out as soon as I see him again," Peggy said quietly. "I'm going to tell him."

Jug grew very still. Until she blew out the lamp, Peggy sensed his eyes studying her, but he knew from the tone of her voice that there was no use of arguing.

The next morning he was sober, and still quiet. After saddling a horse, he tied the whisky jug to the saddlehorn. Then he

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turned to her, a crooked grin on his face and misery in his eyes.

"Knew it'd catch up with me some day," he said. "Always had a notion to see how they live down in Old Mexico." He waved his hand. "Good luck, Peggy."

"Good-by, Dad," she said, and watched him ride off without once looking back. She felt very much alone.

Trying not to think of facing Sandy, she rode into Hunterton. In town she forced her feet to carry her to the sheriff's office. As soon as she came in, Sandy rose from behind his desk and hurried to meet her.

"Gee, I'm glad—" His voice choked off, and he frowned. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Peggy swallowed the lump in her throat. She edged closer until his arms came around her. With the comforting pressure of his hands on her back, she manged to start. She told him all about her life, including the time they robbed the store.

When she finished, Sandy patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, Peggy. We'll just forget all about this."

Peggy backed away, staring up at his eyes. "But that hardware robbery we did here. It's your duty to—"

"I know, but—" Sandy broke off, flushing, and he spread his hands wide. "I couldn't put you in jail, Peggy." He grew even redder. "I love you too much."

Her heart beat faster, but Peggy tried to hide how much his words meant to her.

"If you want me to trust you, Sandy, we can't forget it," she said quietly.

Reluctantly, shaking his head, Sandy locked her in the cell. When he looked at her through the bars, his smile looked forced. "I'll try to get the trial as soon as possible," he said. "Judge Black is good-hearted, even if he has got a lawbook for a head." His gray eyes grew warm. "I hope when we get you freed—you'll marry me."

"I will," Peggy said, her gaze unwavering. "I'll be very happy to be your wife."

WHEN THE DAY came, the trial lasted less than an hour. Resigned to whatever the judge would do, Peggy sat calmly, waiting for the verdict. Sandy didn't. Watching him out of the corner of her eye, Peggy saw him squirming in his chair.

The jury foreman read the verdict. Guilty as charged. The courtroom hushed while Judge Black shifted uneasily.

"I'm taking your recommendation under careful consideration, Sheriff," he said kindly. "But to be fair, I'm afraid I can't follow it. Whatever our personal feelings, justice must be done." He paused. "The lightest sentence I can make in this case is one year. However, he added hastily, "because of what you told me, Sheriff Neal, I'll allow her to serve the sentence in your jail, under your care."

In a gloomy silence, Sandy took her back to the office. Peggy tried hard to think of something to cheer him up. "It won't seem so long," she said finally, "not if I can stay here and—"

"A whole year," he muttered. "Might as well be half a lifetime."

Inwardly Peggy agreed. It did seem like a terribly long time. But she would have waited ten years to marry Sandy, so she tried not to think about it. After putting her back in the cell, Sandy walked out, shoulders slumped.

A slow hour passed, and another. Then Sandy barged back through the door, a clothes dresser over one shoulder, a chair under the opposite arm. His gray eyes were shining, and there was the familiar wide grin on his face.

"Get ready," he said, his voice high with excitement. "The preacher's on his way. We're getting married!"

Peggy stared at him. "But I've got to stay here. And if we can't be together, there's no real reason—"

Her voice trailed off, and she looked down at the floor.

"That's what I thought first, till I got this other idea," Sandy said happily. "According to law, I can't let you out." He grinned. "But you know there's no law says I can't move in with my wife!"

Peggy looked up, smiling, and he laughed as he unlocked the door and took her in his arms.

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

WOMAN OF LEO

JULY 23—AUG. 22

UNDER the majestic sign of Leo, on August 5, 1834, a home-made flag, fashioned of red flannel, unbleached sheeting and blue cloth was raised to signify the completion of Fort Hall, Idaho. An important outpost on the Old Oregon Trail, it became the rendezvous of such famous mountain men as Jim Bridger and Kit Carson.

Just as the old fort dominated the surrounding country, so the Leo woman tends to dominate those around her. Is this so surprising under the sign of the lordly lion? Appropriately enough, the Leo girl was meant to be a queen—at least to all who know her—and this is the rôle she fills naturally with charm and wisdom.

Fully aware of her power over others, she usually uses it for their benefit. The woman of Leo has poise and self-confidence. She often takes a back seat and gives others credit, and is never afraid of making a generous gesture. She makes those who know her feel important, and so becomes the strong center of her circle of friends.

Born under Leo, a woman will have both strength of mind and strength of heart. Hers is a loyalty above suspicion, and a devotion knowing no bounds.

Because of the natural magnetism which the woman of Leo enjoys, she may well be warned to avoid all appearances of domination, as she will never err if she just lets people appreciate her abilities without making them feel inferior. She should give way in the little things because her energies are best turned to major efforts.

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

TUCSON was bustling with cattlemen, all wearing ten-gallon hats, and all talking quarter horse. It was the annual four-day convention of the American Quarter Horse Ass'n, crammed with all kinds of events to show off the talents of the quarter horse—everything from calf-roping to stake racing.

The cattlemen, from all over the West, but mostly from Texas (and mostly millionaires), came only incidentally to win prizes for their own horses. Their main interest was to support and encourage the breed of quarter horse, which all of them consider the smartest, fleetest all-around mounts in the world.

There was some excitement when Rukin String, after a poor start on a windy, dusty day, set a new track record of 22.1 for 440 yards. But most of the talk and most of the interest centered around the cutting horse contest. There was a purse of $3,000 plus a $125 entry fee from each of the thirty-four contestants. The real object was glory, because the thirty-four entries were the best cutting horses in the West, and the winner would be the accepted champion of the National Cutting Horse Ass'n.

Before the first go-round the favorites were such famous horses as Snipper W, last year's reserve champion; Red Boy, Wild Bill Elliott's constant winner; and such other famous contestants as Skeeter, Jesses James and Caesar's Pistol. Miss Nancey, who won nine firsts and two seconds last season, was also considered a big threat. Hardly anyone noticed Marion's Girl, a trim, four-year-old mare, owned by Marion Flynt and ridden by Buster Welch, both of Midland, Tex. Why should anyone have noticed her? In her only other appearance at a big show she hadn't even made the finals.

But after the first two go-rounds, in which the field was pared down to eleven for the finals, everyone was talking about Marion's Girl. In her first performance she took first place; in her second she missed by only two points. So she was leading the field going into the finals.

The wind which had bothered the racers was still blowing Sunday night for the cutting-horse contest. The chill kept the crowd to 2,500—every one of them passionate horse lovers who wouldn't have missed the show even during a hurricane.

Most of the spectators figured that Buster Welch would pick a fairly co-operative steer for Marion's Girl to cut from the herd of forty head, playing it safe, protecting his lead, rather than taking a chance of losing it with a flashy performance.

But Buster guided Marion's Girl to the liveliest steer in the bunch. The audience began to show its appreciation the minute Marion's Girl entered the herd, quietly, almost in slow motion, with Welch tall and straight in the saddle.

It took the steer twenty seconds to notice that he was being separated, but then suddenly he dashed for the fence. Like a flash the horse intercepted him, turning him toward the hazers, who immediately began whooping it up, sending the steer back toward the herd. But Marion's Girl was always in the way. The steer charged and she stood her ground; the steer sidestepped, but he couldn't dodge her. For several more seconds the two of them parried—the steer darting cannily, the mare brilliantly blocking him. The crowd was on its feet cheering.

All of a sudden the steer made one last desperate dash toward the spectators, trying to circle behind Marion's Girl and thus

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get back to the herd. He very nearly made it. But with a brilliant burst of speed and quick thinking, the mare cut him off.

In the final few seconds of the performance, Marion's Girl showed the audience another of her talents, which looked like pure hypnotism. Facing the steer, she stared at him with such intensity that he seemed turned to stone. The two animals stood absolutely motionless. It was a dramatic finish to an exciting show, and Marion's Girl brought down the house.

There was no question about who had won, but the fans listened tensely for the number of points the judges had awarded. Marion's Girl was given 225 out of a possible 240, and many people thought it should have been higher. It was more than enough to win, though. Marion's Girl's total was 671 points for three go-rounds; Miss Nancey took second place with 655; and Snipper W made third with 652.

Only four horses in history have ever won perfect scores, by the way, the famous Nigger having done it twice before he was retired. Many cutting-horse authorities believe the top score should never be given, holding that nothing in life, not even a cutting horse, can be perfect.

Marion Flynt paid $2,000 for Marion's Girl about a year and a half ago, and he could well afford it. He owns a 56-section ranch, and several oil wells. He's also president of the Midland Indians baseball team and of the Midland Rodeo Ass'n.

He hired Buster Welch to train Marion's Girl for competition, but says she was a natural. He was about the only member of the AQHA who wasn't surprised at her victory. The only comment he had to make was that Marion's Girl wasn't for sale—"not for all the oil wells in Texas."

The horse had already proved her usefulness on a ranch before Flynt bought her. She showed cow sense from the day she started working, and when Flynt saw her he decided she ought to be a show horse.

Like Marion's Girl, Buster Welch is a real ranch hand. About half his time nowadays is spent as a trainer, not only for Flynt but for other cattlemen.

He's a compact five-foot-nine, blond, always sunburned, with a round, smiling, small-boy face. About the only time the grin leaves his face is when he's competing, and then he sits sober and still in the saddle, his hat pulled down to his eyebrows.

Once you hear him talk, you don't need to be told he's from Texas. His drawl is pronounced and his words are always modest. He insisted on giving the credit for the victory to Flynt, and would say hardly a word about his method of training Marion's Girl—which might be modesty or might be professional secrecy.

In general, though, it may be said that training a cutting horse is a matter of patience and understanding. The hrose is shown, with rein and knee, what he has to do—separate the steer from the herd and keep the critter from getting back. At first the horse must be guided through his paces and restrained from biting or kicking his adversary. Eventually, the horse goes through the whole thing with no help from the rider, after the latter has indicated the calf he wants cut. And the horse comes to depend entirely on his own skill and sense, and even to regard the steer not as his enemy but as his charge.

It is easy to see that Buster and Marion's Girl are devoted to each other. While they posed for the photographers she kept nuzzling him affectionately.

And one would also guess that Marion's Girl is a happy horse. There's an alert look about her, as if she was always on the lookout for a calf to head off. She seems to enjoy the fast foot and head work of cutting.

As the outgoing president of the National Cutting Horse Ass'n, Gay Copeland, put it: "A horse has to have a natural bent for cutting. Just any horse can't be trained for the work. He has to want to do it."

Having been trained for competition hasn't spoiled her for ranch work. "In fact," said Flynt, "if I saved her just for shows it would probably break her heart."

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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Web of Guns

By Dorothy L. Bonar

Luke flew backward and hit the floor

THE STORY SO FAR:

When JEB BELDEN was a boy his father had been accused of murder and suicide; now Jeb returns to the Peace Pipe to clear his name. But he finds that the four tough MUNGER brothers claim ownership, although the Beldens' old friend, JOHN NEWELL, had paid taxes and sent Jeb receipts to his uncle's home in Texas. Jeb's life is threatened by a rustlers' gang headed by a man named BRECK, but Jeb escapes, wounded, and is helped by ANN GARTH, who nurses him at her home. Ann tells Jeb that she had worked as bookkeeper for Newell; that taxes on the Peace Pipe had been paid but not recorded by the bribed town clerk. Everyone, including perhaps Newell, thought Ann had appropriated the money. Newell, coming to account to Jeb next day, is ambushed, and arrives, dying, in his pickup. Ann rides for the doctor and sheriff, and Jeb, firing from concealment, tries to hold the bushwhacker there until their arrival. . . .

PART THREE

AFTERWARDS, Jeb remembered having seen the doctor hop from his rig, black bag in hand. He heard Fallon tell Ann he would need her, and he

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saw the physician hurry the girl ahead of him into the house, indifferent to everything save his waiting patient. He remembered the anxious, questioning look Ann threw over her shoulder before she passed from sight. Now his mind could deal only with the surprise of the drygulcher's identity and the disconcerting behavior of the sheriff and his deputy.

The latter, a medium-sized man with the watery eyes and reddened nose of a hay fever sufferer, sneezed violently. "Gun smoke always does that to me," he apologized. "I can smell it a mile away. Seems like—"

"Never mind, Polk!" The tall man wearing a sheriff's badge pinned to his expensive shirt ignored Breck and squared about. "So you're Jeb Belden!" he said flatly.

The sheriff was Brady Reese. Jeb had failed to make that connection until now. His encounter with Reese and the girl, Lila, seemed to have taken place long ago, but Jeb saw the rankling memory in the green depths of the lawman's eyes. Jealousy, dislike, and antagonism followed swiftly. Reese was the sheriff, and a man had been drygulched, and the drygulcher delivered into his custody; yet his first thought and concern was for a small personal matter. Contempt whipped through Jeb. He shoved forward the gun leveled upon Breck.

"Yes, I'm Jeb Belden!" he said savagely. "But this is the snake who drygulched John Newell!"

Again the reaction was wrong. Polk stared in open-mouthed incredulity. Reese frowned, as though it took effort to tear his mind from personalities. He said, "What's he talking about, Breck? What happened?"

The rustler shrugged. "Misunderstanding, that's all. Don't know as I blame him, either, though he damned near got me." He began to explain.

Riding behind the buckboard, Breck had been close enough to see Newell take two bullets. Convinced that Newell was dead, he had charged the drygulcher's position, chased and quickly lost him in the rough country behind the ridge. Turning back and entering the Garth farm by way of the barnyard, he had been mistaken for the killer.

"I had to duck behind the barn," Breck continued guilelessly. "I yelled at Belden, here, but couldn't make him listen. So I worked my way up through the rocks and tried to reason with him—"

"He came back to finish his job when he saw Ann head for town and realized Newell must still be alive!" broke in Jeb. "He did his dammedest to kill me so he could get into the house. Look at his gun!"

"Of course I did some shooting," admitted Breck quickly. "I had to, to hold him off."

"Put up that hogleg, Belden!" snapped Reese.

Incredulous rage burned through Jeb's chest and up into his throat. "You're taking his word for everything?" he demanded.

Reese fixed him with a hard, squinted gaze. He said, "Get this, Belden. You've got a damned good motive for wanting to shoot John Newell yourself—blaming him for losing the Peace Pipe for you. Ann's story puts you in the clear, and Breck says you put up a good fight, thinking you was protecting Newell. Take my advice and let it rest there. Don't shoot off your mouth until you know what you're talking about. Breck'd never harm John Newell in a million years. He's a Newell, too—John Newell's son!"

The burning in Jeb's chest and throat rushed to his head. Dimly he heard Breck enlarge upon his glib explanation. Breck had intended to accompany his father here this morning, having been equally anxious to meet Jeb Belden. However, he had been delayed giving the Bar N crew their orders for the day. Newell, growing impatient, had driven off without him.

"I followed him as soon as I could," went on Breck. "But I didn't catch up soon enough to do any good. And all this time I couldn't get to him, or even find out how bad he's hurt. . ."

"Go on in," said Reese in ready sympathy. He stepped into Jeb's path as the latter's frame jerked in involuntary protest. His hand dropped to his gun. "I said put that hogleg away, Belden!" he snapped.

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SLOWLY Jeb obeyed Reese's order. But his gaze followed Breck, and the irony of the situation filled him with bitterness.

"There's something crazy about this!" he burst out. "Newell's wife left him about fifteen years ago. His son wasn't any more than three or four then. I can remember him—towheaded, and almost as pretty as a girl. He'd be a good ten years younger than Breck right now. And his name was—" he groped and it came to him. Toby. *Toby!*

Mistaking his sudden speechlessness, Reese continued for him. "The kid's name was Toby, and he's eighteen. He's a real tenderfoot, too, on account of being left in a boarding school back East when his ma came back to his pa. She died last year. Toby came home, then, to stay."

"Then Breck?"

"Was a stray Newell picked up over in Granite City right after his wife pulled out. He adopted him legally—raised him like his own. Toby worships him like they were real blood brothers. So remember where Breck stands in Wampum Valley—and where you stand. Watch your step!"

Whipping about with an air of having talked enough, he made for the house. Polk sneezed again.

"Brady's right," he remarked. "Breck's as much a Newell as if he'd been born one. Lots of folks don't know he wasn't. Even after he got Toby back, Newell never treated him no different. Toby and Breck both have all the money they want to spend and gamble with, and Newell's will even leaves the Bar N divided equally between 'em. Yes sir, Breck's Newell's son, all right."

But Jeb had turned mechanically and was following in Reese's wake. When he stepped into Ann's kitchen, the figures of the girl and doctor screened the wounded man on the cot from sight. But the fact that they were working over him proved he was still alive. Silently Breck and the sheriff looked on. Reese's jaw was set and he seemed to be shaken by both anger and pity. Breck's face was as expressionless as that of a superb gambler betting his all on the last spin of a wheel—which actually was the case.

Breck had been able to bluff his way out of a seemingly hopeless situation on the strength of his relationship to Newell and his solid standing in the valley. Complete success could depend now on a number of things—whether or not John Newell had reason to know or suspect the identity of his assailant; whether or not Newell regained consciousness long enough to reveal any information he might possess.

Breck's chances of doing anything to tip the balance in his favor were now practically nil. He could do nothing more than sweat it out. That realization was grimly mirrored in the gray-green eyes that met Jeb's.

Doc Fallon looked up. He was short and round, with pale blue eyes as sharp as one of his scalpels. He had a brusque, efficient manner.

"Imperative that he be taken into town," he said. "The removal of that bullet will require delicate surgery."

"But can he stand the trip?" burst out Ann.

The physician's glance challenged her right to question his judgment. "Perhaps not," he snapped. "But he will certainly die if that bullet remains in him much longer; and he would have no chance at all if I attempted to operate here."

He pursed his lips briefly. "I shall require assistance, of course. You did very well as a nurse, Ann, the time that Bar N hand injured himself. Would you be willing this time?"

Ann said faintly, "Yes."

"Then you men hitch a team to a spring wagon!" His tone brooked no argument or hesitation. "Pad it well with hay or straw. And Ann, we must have plenty of blankets to keep him warm."

HIS ORDERS were carried out. After the wounded man had been carefully deposited in the bed of Ann's wagon, the doctor waved the girl to the driver's seat. Settling himself at his patient's side, he directed that his own team and buggy be tethered to the endgate for their return trip to town.

In the meantime Breck brought from the barnyard his own saddled roan and John

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Newell's buckboard and team, undamaged and uninjured.

Reese said to him, "You'll want to stick close to the old man, of course. How about driving back to town and lending your bronc to Belden here? Reckon it'd be a good idea for him to go with Polk and me to pick up that drygulcher's trail."

When Jeb turned, he faced a leveled gun. Reese said coldly, "I'm not fool enough to turn you loose around Breck yet. Besides, Ann said she didn't know how you happened to wind up here, afoot and bullet grazed, and I'm plumb curious. You can do your talking while we ride."

Though every instinct protested hotly, Jeb had to admit that what the sheriff said was reasonable. Reese had not accepted Breck's story above his merely out of personal spite. He really believed it, as the entire valley probably would. Therefore it was Reese's duty to prevent trouble between Jeb Belden and Breck. It was also his right to full information, and perhaps a straightforward account of recent events would at least start him thinking.

"All right," said Jeb. "Maybe you'll change your tune when you find tracks that don't jibe with Breck's story." He called to the physician. "Hear this, Doc! Breck shot Newell—and Newell will die if you leave Breck alone with him for a minute!"

"He's crazy!" Advancing a step, Breck betrayed the first feeling Jeb had seen in him. Fear could be a powerful prod. "You all know how close the old man and I are. What reason would I have to shoot him? Besides, I ain't got a rifle with me!" His wave of hand called attention to an empty saddleboot.

Jeb said grimly, "You had plenty of time to cache it before you brought your bronc from behind the barn!"

A movement in Breck's heavy-lidded eyes was like the flicking of a snake's tongue. "You're crowdin' your luck too far—" he growled, starting forward.

Doc Fallon pushed between them. "At the moment I don't care who did the shooting!" he snapped. "My only interest is to save my patient's life. Head out, Ann!"

The girl called to her horses and slapped lines to broad backs. Her expression was grave, deeply disturbed. If she had been the Bar N bookkeeper for several years, she would be well acquainted with Breck. The thought that perhaps she, too, regarded Breck highly stabbed Jeb, emphasizing his frustration.

It was a state of depression that did not lift, for while they found nothing to confirm Breck's story, neither did they find anything to contradict it. The drought was to blame, of course, for the almost complete absence of sign. Horses' hoofs left little mark on ground baked hard and dry. It was impossible to tell if Breck had turned off the road to charge the drygulcher's position, as he had claimed, nor did they discover anything enlightening on the ridge itself.

Reining up presently, Jeb mopped a sweaty forehead. He said, "We'd ought to be looking around the barn for Breck's cached rifle."

REESE didn't answer that. The continued failure of their search had not sweetened his mood. Giving Jeb a black look, he waved a hand towards the broken terrain to the north.

"The drygulcher had to leave that way," he said. "He's bound to have left tracks somewhere. We'll split up and spread out. But first—" Lounging sidewise in his saddle, he fixed Jeb with a gaze that mirrored a trace of malice. "Reckon this is as good a time as any for you to answer a few questions, Belden. Who shot you?"

Jeb said bluntly, "Breck."

"I don't mean just a while ago. I—" Reese stiffened. "You and Breck never even scratched each other! What in hell—"

"I'm talking about the wound I had when I got to Ann's place," said Jeb. "It wasn't much, but that's not Breck's fault. He tried."

Polk, listening, shifted a cud of tobacco from cheek to cheek and spat.

Reese said, "You're claiming you had a run-in with Breck before today? Where? And when?"

"Early evening of my first day in the valley," retorted Jeb. "The same day I ran

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into you and Lila Trimble. The place was called Juniper Basin. Before that—"

"You're a liar!" said Reese.

The insult slapped Jeb's face and drained away some of its color. He said, "It's easy to talk big behind a badge!"

"Breck was in town yesterday with two Bar N waddies," asserted Reese. "He'd just got back from a week in Granite City, arranging for stock cars. Bar N's got to ship half its herd, now that it's lost out on Peace Pipe range. I had a drink with 'em and Breck told me about his trip himself."

Unwilling admiration was Jeb's first reaction. His escape at Juniper Basin might have stampeded a lesser opponent into making a disastrous mistake. Instead, Breck had quickly and coolly arranged an alibi for that particular time, confident that his word would be the one to be accepted in a showdown.

Suddenly Jeb realized it would be wasted breath to relate his misadventure in the hills. To accuse Breck and Toby Newell of stealing their father's cattle would only increase the ill feeling against him and fan Brady Reese's antagonism to a greater heat.

He said, "So Breck was in Granite City instead of Juniper Basin three days ago. Then the wound I got in the hills must have been imagination."

A surge of blood gave Reese's face a liverish hue. "Smart guy!" he rasped.

Jeb shrugged. "We're only wasting time."

Again Polk spat tobacco juice. As it splattered on a rock, Reese's black shied, the nervous stomping of his hoofs cutting through the sheriff's heavy breathing.

Reese snapped, "You never showed up in town so you must have gone straight to the Peace Pipe. That means it was the Mungers you had the run-in with. Maybe it was as much their fault as yours, I don't know. Just get this, Belden." His jaw set, square and hard, "No one's taking the law into his own hands while I'm sheriff. I'll get whoever drygulched John Newell. And I won't stand for any fighting over the Peace Pipe outside of a court of law. If there's any gunplay I'll see that whoever started it winds up in the pen, or hangs!"

THEY DIDN'T SEPARATE, as Reese had previously decided. In proof of a deepened distrust, he kept Jeb with him and sent only Polk in a different direction to begin scouring the terrain beyond the drygulcher's ridge for fresh tracks. For Jeb there followed a long, pointless search that strained his patience to the utmost. Only his own efforts, and his own failure, would make any dent in Reese's stubborn opposition. Jeb set himself to wait for the first doubt that must inevitably take shape in the lawman's mind.

They covered many miles, winding back and forth, often criss-crossing their own trails. They followed winding draws and dry washes. They climbed wooded hills and rocky ridges, sometimes in the saddle, oftener afoot, but always with eyes fixed on the ground. The afternoon wore on to sunset, and the air began to cool. Suddenly the sound of a horse approaching brought them both to a halt.

It was Polk. He moved into sight against a reddened sky and, spying them, spurred a tiring mount forward.

"Any luck?" was his greeting.

Disappointment settled over Reese's face. "No. And you?"

The deputy swore disgustedly. "All I got's a crick in my neck and a thirst a mile long. It'd take an Injun to track anything over this ground. That bushwhacking son had everything in his favor and he didn't make no mistakes."

"Except letting me find out who he was," said Jeb.

He expected Reese to blow up. Instead the lawman gave him a dark, thoughtful look. "You really believe Breck's the one, don't you?" he said. "You're not just sticking to that story because you hate to admit you were wrong?"

"I'm not wrong," said Jeb. "Breck shot John Newell. I'm not sure why, but I'm beginning to get an idea. Want to hear it?"

"Sure," Polk said, and grinned.

Reese threw the deputy a frowning glance and then his face seemed to close up. "I'm not interested in wild theories," he said curtly. "Any time you're ready to talk straight and stick to facts, look me up. Right

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now I'm heading for town to see how Newell's doing. There's a chance he's come to long enough to tell something. You can do as you please as long as you stay out of trouble. Come on, Polk!"

He reined away, and the deputy followed reluctantly.

Jeb shrugged. Any sheriff who kept on a loose-tongued deputy he could not take fully into his confidence was a fool. And he was a fool for attempting to find a hint of softening in Reese's arrogance that probably didn't exist.

MOODY AND ON EDGE, Jeb pointed his mount's nose townward. Keeping to a steady jog, he did not overtake Reese and his deputy. Darkness fell. From a lone tree the ghostly hooting of an owl emphasized the stillness that was not silence, but a harmonious blend of varied soft, rustling sounds.

When the lights of Bearclaw came into sight, they looked like yellow, winking eyes, leering at him in malevolent humor. Beau Belden had founded the town and it still bore the name he had given it in honor of an Indian friend. But what would Beau Belden's son find awaiting him there?

Unconsciously Jeb sat stiff and straight in the saddle, as he headed up Main Street at a walk. This early evening hour found few abroad. But there were too many horses at hitch-racks for a normal week night—enough to indicate a gathering of John Newell's friends, and perhaps a few enemies, to await the outcome of his battle for life. Though saloons should be doing a good business, their usual uproar of voices, laughter, and tinny music was greatly subdued.

Jeb picked out a few new structures filling former vacant spots between familiar, weatherbeaten buildings. There was a mercantile to give the general store competition; there was a restaurant promising food for the hungry at all hours, in contrast to the rigid mealtime schedule of the hotel dining room. But most interesting of all was the Bearclaw *Clarion*—the newspaper Ann said her father had founded.

From the saddle Jeb was able to look over half-curtains into an office where a man wearing an eye shade and black sleeve protectors wrote busily at a desk.

Then a sign bearing the legend, "James D. Fallon, Physician and Surgeon" caught his eye. There were lights in that building on the ground floor, both front and back. Through a waiting-room window he could see Ann standing at an opened inner door, talking to Brady Reese. Breck, tall and bareheaded, stood behind her. Naturally, in his role of worried, devoted son, Breck would remain as close as possible to John Newell's bedside. No doubt Toby, too, had been summoned there by this time.

He had done all he could to safeguard Newell from a second murderous attack. He had warned Ann and Doc Fallon, as well as Reese. He could only wait. So long as everything remained quiet, the wounded man would be holding on. If he died the news would quickly sweep through town.

A new brick courthouse, complete with tower and bell, stood in a square at the end of the street. Its only light was in a lower left corner window. There, against a pattern of bars, Jeb made out the words, "Sheriff's Office and Jail." The road turning left would lead to the Bar N. A lane to the right led him to a livery barn.

There was no one about, not even a stable hand. They'd probably gone to supper, and Jeb was reminded that his stomach could stand refueling. Quickly he unsaddled and cared for the roan. He washed in the watering trough and ran his hands through his wet hair. Then he headed for the main part of town. This was the acid test—his first public appearance in Wampum Valley.

A MAN PUSHED through the batwings of a saloon as he was passing. In a tall, stoop-shouldered figure and hatchet face Jeb recognized Ames of the A Cross.

"Hello, Charlie," he said.

There was no response. Pride forbade him to wait and learn whether the rancher's woodenness was deliberate or sprang from a lack of recognition. He strode on and turned into the restaurant, and entered

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a situation that swept all else out of his mind.

The supper rush was evidently over. Only one man sat at the counter, and he had finished his meal. Dishes pushed to the side, he was tormenting a waitress, holding both her wrists in an iron grip and pulling her slowly forward, despite her struggles to break free. His tall, heavy-shouldered shape and slovenly appearance was familiar. A hot churning started up in Jeb's veins as the man spoke.

"A little late to start acting hard to get, ain't it?" the man was jeering. "What have you got—"

"Let her go!" rapped out Jeb.

The man released the waitress and spun about. He had squinted, yellowish eyes in a gaunt, sun-reddened face. He was one of the Mungers, all right. Luke. Ann's terror while being chased in the dark by this man flashed into his mind. He recalled Luke's part in the first cold-blooded attempt on his own life. Abruptly the churning in his veins exploded in a blast of blinding heat.

He did not realize he had moved until he heard the solid crack of fist to jaw and felt the shock of the blow shoot up his arm to his shoulder. Luke flew backward, hit the floor with a crash and slid several feet. With a quick shake of head he rolled over and to his knees, whipping his gun from leather.

Jeb bounded forward and kicked the weapon out of his hand. He seized him by the shirt front, yanked him up and, with a chopping right, knocked him down again. This time Luke merely propped himself up on an elbow. Blood trickled from one corner of his mouth. He said nothing, but his eyes were burning yellow pools, like those of a cougar brought to bay.

The insensate pound of blood through Jeb's head began to subside. Its place was taken by the disgust and regret that invariably followed any loss of temper.

Crossing the room, he picked up Luke's gun and emptied it. Luke climbed to his feet and received it in silence. He shoved the weapon into its holster and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

"When he's wild, he's bad! But when he's quiet like that—" There was a shiver in the waitress's voice.

Until now Jeb had given her only a glance. She was wearing a ruffled apron and calico gown buttoned decorously high at the throat. But her bright golden hair and the beauty of her face were unchanged. She was Lila Trimble.

"Thanks!" she said earnestly. "I've prayed to see that happen to Luke Munger—and a few others. But he'll try to kill you now."

"He would anyway." As she stared, dubious and unconvinced, honesty compelled Jeb to add, "I didn't hit him because he was annoying you. I had a score of my own to settle with him. And you won't be responsible, no matter what comes of it."

She continued to stare at him, lips parted in the surprise of belated recognition. She breathed, "I didn't know you—shaved and washed up—but I should have. No other man has ever bothered to stand up for me. And you have—twice."

Amused and exasperated, Jeb didn't argue. Sliding onto a stool, he said, "Your folks run this place?"

"I run it," she answered. "It's mine."

THE DEFIANT PRIDE in her voice caused Jeb to survey her keenly.

She went on, "I ran away from home when I was seventeen and worked in a dancehall two years to save up enough money to start this business!"

Plainly she expected a change to occur in his expression or the look in his eyes. When it did not, her own expression softened until her face took on a sort of grateful glow.

"I was right," she said. "You're different. If I told you I only sang and danced with the customers—and that's all—I bet you'd believe it."

Jeb said gently, "Why shouldn't I believe it?"

Bitterness curved her lips. "My father won't. He's slaved behind a plow all his life. He's getting old and stove up, farming eighty acres—hardly making a living. I wanted him to move into town with me and take it easy in his old age. Instead he won't even speak to me."

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Before he could think of anything to say, she gained control of herself, seeming to regret her personal outburst.

"What'll it be, cowboy?" she asked stiffly. "Steak, or ham and eggs?"

"All-fired quiet," remarked Jeb at last, finishing his meal and bringing out tobacco and papers.

The girl refilled his coffee cup. "It's liable not to stay that way long," she said. "I just saw Luke Munger head out of town. He's probably going after his brothers, Cal and Matt. You'd better watch out, cowboy. Next time you'll face three instead of one."

Jeb kept his eyes on the cigarette he was rolling. He said, "You sound as though you know the Mungers pretty well. Where did they come from? How long have they been around here?"

Her answer came slowly, as though she felt compelled to give it, but doubted the prudence of doing so. "About a year. To hear them talk they came from a lot of places. They seemed to be drifting cowhands, almost saddletramps, until—"

Jeb looked up. "Yes?"

Again she responded hesitantly. "Until all of a sudden they bought the biggest ranch in the valley for back taxes. Nobody else knew the county had taken the Peace Pipe over."

"There was no notice to that effect—no public sale?"

She shook her head. "There was talk about the deal not being exactly on the level. Especially from John Newell. But he couldn't seem to get anywhere."

Thanks to bribery and no telling what other kind of coercion brought to bear upon those in authority. Ann's story was true; her deductions were sound. The Mungers were exactly what they appeared, range tramps hired to front for the man Ann called Mr. Smart. He was the man who had not only devised an ingenious plan for stealing the Peace Pipe, but was very close to getting away with it. A man as clever and ruthless and cool as— Every nerve in Jeb's body jumped. *As Breck!*

"What's your name, cowboy?" inquired Lila Trimble.

But Jeb did not hear. Feverishly he was gathering up all the loose threads and attempting to weave them into a pattern. Could there be two separate conspiracies involving greed and murder? The Peace Pipe steal . . . the Mungers . . . the rustling of Bar N cattle by Breck and Toby Newell. . .

Here a sense of discrepancy gave Jeb pause. Polk had mentioned Newell's generosity to his adopted son, stating that both Breck and Toby were always well supplied with money. Why should they steal from the Bar N? A remark of Toby's, quickly cut off by Breck, came back to him.

I should have known better. Murder's a lot different from framing evidence for. . .

JEB SAID slowly, "Do you know anyone who uses a Circle 4 M iron?"

"The Mungers."

He was not surprised. He could see certain parts of the puzzle fall into place. There were still pieces missing, but the pattern he sought was beginning to take shape. He had found the connection between Breck and the Mungers. He knew how the latter were being used, and why.

"You're awful good at asking questions." The girl's voice, uneasy and sharp, pierced his pre-occupation. "Suppose you answer a few?"

The door opened, diverting her attention. A wide-eyed look of dismay flashed into her face. Swiftly it changed to one of languid coolness.

"Hello, Brady," she said indifferently. Without warning, her hand covered one of Jeb's on the counter, and she bent close. "I close at two o'clock," she said softly. "Come back. I'll be waiting."

She straightened then, and addressed the newcomer with a faint, mocking smile. "The usual, Brady, dear?" she inquired.

Reese uttered a strangled sound. Across the few feet of space separating them, Jeb saw a vein at his left temple begin to throb. Earlier in the evening he had known hope that Reese's personal animosity might lessen, that they might eventually be able to get together. Now that hope had been blasted.

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Reese said thickly, "You've got troubles now, Belden—you think! Wait'll she gets her claws into you. You'll find out what hell really is!"

Turning, he lurched away, leaving the door unclosed behind him.

Several horsemen rode down the street, trailing an echo of laughter. A dog went into a frenzy of barking.

"Belden!" exclaimed the girl. "He called you Belden?"

"Why not?" said Jeb bitterly, tossing a dollar to the counter as he rose to his feet. "It's my name!"

"But you can't be Jeb Belden! He's out at Ann Garth's, wounded. . ." Her voice trailed off and her face paled. "Of course! No one said he was hurt bad. I took that for granted." She put her hands together and twisted them in a futile, pathetic gesture. "I'm sorry I got you in bad with Brady Reese again, Jeb," she said. "I just —maybe I'll be able to square myself some day. I know a lot. If ever I dare to tell—"

"Forget it," said Jeb wearily.

His anger at her deliberate use of him once more as an instrument for torturing Brady Reese died quickly. Though the ways of women were beyond him, he sensed that she was merely fighting back in desperation and anguish.

Outside he stood a moment gazing down the walk at the patterns of light cast through the windows and batwings of saloons. Across the street the hotel lobby emitted a dull yellow glow. All other places of business were dark and silent.

The activity of the day had tired him. His healing shoulder ached dully. All he wanted now was to crawl into bed and sleep. Yet the news of his presence in town must have spread by this time. In every saloon they were probably discussing his return, raking up the past. And if he didn't show himself—face them down—they would think. . .

"The hell with it!" muttered Jeb, recognizing the futile bravado of a deliberate public parade, the uselessness of caring what anyone thought of his actions.

Crossing the street, he entered the hotel. An aged desk clerk slept in a chair tilted against the wall, hands laced across his middle and toothless mouth agape. Jeb started to wake him, then shrugged. He helped himself to a key, took up a pen and turned the register. The latest entry, dated the same day, caught his eye. Matthew Steele. San Francisco, California.

STEELE had been given Room 10, and his key hung on its nail. That meant he was somewhere about town, in a saloon perhaps, overhearing discussions of current events and gathering the facts of the Peace Pipe situation.

Jeb assigned himself Room 11 and slowly climbed a narrow staircase to a shadowy hall. His footsteps sounded loud on a carpetless floor. When he had lighted a lamp in a room containing a sagging bed, chair, and washstand, he stood gazing about, feeling but not seeing the bare cheerlessness of his surroundings. He had reached an impasse. He was incapable of constructive thought. As he struggled to overcome that handicap, a shout lifted in the street.

It was repeated continuously. Galvanized to physical activity, Jeb leaped to a window and threw up the lower sash. A man came running from the direction of Doc Fallon's office. Through the cool night air his excited cry rang out shrilly.

"Newell's dead! John Newell just died!"

Mechanically Jeb backed out of the window. Doc Fallon had said the ranchman's chances were none too good. Yet, inevitably, so long as life remained, hope had flourished. Now that hope was gone. Regret and a sense of personal loss weighed heavily upon Jeb's heart. It was some time before he was able to consider the other results of Newell's passing.

Breck would be undisputed boss of the Bar N now, according to plan. Breck was Ann's Mr. Smart, all right. It was he who had supplied the Mungers with the money to take over the Peace Pipe, on the secret agreement that they would "sell" it to him later. Naturally the tax deed had had to be issued in their names. And naturally Breck had taken steps to prevent a possible doublecross. With typical scheming he had arranged for the Mungers' Circle 4 M brand

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to be run over a Bar N on a few head of cattle, which would be hidden in the hills and held over the Mungers' heads as evidence of rustling on their part, should they refuse to carry out their assignment.

The sound of footsteps in the hall interrupted Jeb's bitter musings. Quickly he went to the door and opened it a crack. A man in brown corduroy and laced boots had just thrust a key into the next-door lock. Jeb showed himself.

"In here!"

Matthew Steele accepted the invitation with little show of surprise. "I was hoping to contact you soon," he said, when Jeb's door closed behind them. "I finished up my business quicker than I'd expected. Arrived on this afternoon's stage. The town is buzzing about you and the Peace Pipe, and now John Newell is dead. What's it all about, anyway?"

"It's a long story," answered Jeb. "Sit down." After his guest had taken the chair, he perched himself on the edge of the bed.

"You'll want me to start with what happened to John Newell, I suppose?"

"Start at the beginning—the first day you arrived back in the valley."

Jeb did so, giving a full account of his experience from his first meeting with Brady Reese up to the present. He told all there was to tell about Ann Garth, the Mungers, Toby Newell and Breck. Not until he had described the shooting of John Newell did Steele interrupt.

"Ann Garth carried word to him that you were at her place," he said, then. "He mentioned it to Breck. Breck followed and shot him as the easiest means of keeping you two from getting together, because he couldn't afford to let you tell John about those brand-blotted cattle. . ." He broke off as Jeb lifted a warning hand.

FOLLOWING the first excitement of the news of John Newell's death, the town had become remarkably quiet. That was due to the talk and speculation running rife wherever men could gather. Hardly anyone wanted to miss an opportunity to air his opinion and weigh it against that of others. There were bound to be exceptions, however, and one of these was now walking up the hall.

There was something ominous in the deliberation with which the footsteps came straight to Jeb's door. As a knock sounded, the eyes of the two men met. The knock was repeated. The knob turned as the door was tried. Steele put a finger to his lips and, rising, moved silently to the side of the panel that would be hidden when it swung inward.

That he should still care to keep their relationship secret, according to their original plan, indicated an unwillingness to declare the situation hopeless. He was not ready to wash his hands of their proposed deal.

Warmed by new hope, Jeb called out guardedly, "Who is it?"

Briefly it seemed there would be no reply. Then a voice said shrilly, "Toby Newell! Open up, Belden!"

Jeb unlocked the door. Instantly it was shoved in, almost striking him in the face. Toby slid inside. He closed the door and planted his back against it, feet wide-spread and braced. Reddened eyes and a tear-streaked face made him look even younger than when Jeb had seen him in the hills. But his expression was one of ageless hate, and he held a leveled .45 in his right hand.

"I'm going to kill you, Belden!" he cried.

He meant it. That realization was Jeb's biggest shock. But Matthew Steele stood unseen in the corner behind Toby and to his left. He seized the boy as the latter's thumb strained at the gunhammer. Toby let out an inarticulate cry and began to struggle. Jeb reached him in two long steps and wrested the .45 from his hand.

"Hold it, kid!" he barked.

Toby froze. Arms pinned behind his back, he faced Jeb whitely, as though he expected his own life now to be forfeit.

"Let him go," said Jeb. Steele did so. A conflict of surprise, fear, and defiance was obvious in the boy. "Why were you gunning for me, kid?"

Toby said stiffly, "You killed my father!"

Steele uttered an incredulous exclamation. Jeb checked an interruption with a gesture of his left hand

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"Who told you that, Toby?" he queried. "Breck?"

"Dad roused at the last, enough to say your name!"

"And you think that proved I killed him? How about Doc Fallon? How about Ann? Haven't you talked to Ann about the shooting?"

"Ann wasn't there when Dad— I was up in the hills. Only got to town an hour ago. Doc had already sent Ann to bed with a sleeping powder. Afterwards he was called out on a case. . ."

Toby's voice sounded choked. He had set out to kill like an avenging giant, and now he found himself reduced once more to his old fumbling, tenderfoot ineffectuality, and his humiliation and rage was almost too much to bear.

JEB RECALLED times when he had attempted, in identical grief and fury, to defend his father's name, only to be forced into acceptance of this same bitter state of youthful inadequacy. Fury at the man who would so ruthlessly deceive and use a boy swept him beyond pity

He said, "Breck put the whole thing into your head, didn't he? He didn't tell you I couldn't have shot your father because I was with Ann Garth at the time. He deliberately worked you up to this. And do you know why? Not because he expected you to get me. Oh, no! He figured I'd have to shoot to save myself. He was hoping I'd kill you so he could get me hanged. Then he'd be rid of us both."

"You lie! I won't listen to any more—" Toby made a wild rush to escape, and would have yanked open the door had not Steele seized him again.

"Not—so fast, kid," panted the man. "Always finish what you start."

As though he realized the folly of his behavior, Toby gave up. "I lost my head," he said. "I won't again." When Steele tentatively released him, he shoved a shirttail back into his jeans. "Nothing you can say will matter anyway," he went on with sudden dignity. "I know Breck too well. He's a real brother. And he didn't put any ideas into my head He hasn't the least suspicion of what I intended to do to you . . ."

I'll bet, thought Jeb grimly.

"But he does believe you blamed Dad for the loss of the Peace Pipe and that you shot him to get even. I know he means to kill you for it. I thought that should be my job. I never had a chance to do much of anything for my dad. . ." He swallowed a sob.

Jeb swore deep inside. But he snatched at the hope that, quieted now, the boy might prove amenable to reason. Trying to make his voice calmly convincing, he said, "Breck's making a fool out of you, Toby. Up in the hills, when he got rid of you after capturing me—"

"I know all about that!" broke in the boy. "He told you about the rustling frame —how we were hoping to use it to persuade the Mungers to give up the Peace Pipe. It was rotten, but they'd got the ranch through some kind of crookedness, and it was for a good cause. It was killing Dad to think he'd failed a trust. We had to get the Peace Pipe back for you, for his sake. Breck explained all that to you, and begged you to give us time. But you blew up and rode off—"

"That's Breck's story!"

"It's the truth! Connor, Hazlitt—all the boys swear to it. I'd believe Breck even if they didn't. He's been great to me. . ."

"He's lied in his teeth! And he's got part of the Bar N crew—maybe all of it—in cahoots with him. He meant to kill me up in the hills, but I made a break and got away."

Toby's look of scorn stopped Jeb. A sense of futility smote him. Breck had played his cards too well from the very beginning. Perhaps it hadn't been too hard to make himself seem an ideal big brother to a sensitive youth who had never before known close masculine comradeship. For the first time he realized how maliciously incredible his story would sound, not only to Toby but to countless others.

Jeb let out a deep breath in admission of defeat. "All right, kid," he said. "You can go. But think over what I've told you. It's the truth. I hope to God you're still alive when I'm able to prove it!"

Unloading the gun, he thrust it into

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Toby's hands. He turned away, produced tobacco and papers, and began to roll a cigarette. For a moment there was no sound either of speech or movement. Then he heard the door open. Booted feet dragged over the sill, the door closed, and footsteps retreated down the hall.

STEELE said, "At least you gave him something to think about." "Where does that put me?"

Steele ignored the bitterness of the remark. He said cheerfully, "It puts us right where we were—face to face with our first problem, which was recovering the Peace Pipe and those water rights. We need a lawyer to dig into that crooked tax deal and drive our friend Breck and his rats into the open."

"We?" queried Jeb. "You didn't commit yourself to this kind of a fight, Steele."

"Then I do now," declared the other. "Beau Belden was a friend of mine, and that Squatter Flat incident be damned! Besides, I couldn't walk out on any man bucking the kind of odds you're up against alone."

The San Francisco man's jaw jutted out. "This valley is drying up, Jeb. By August half the ranchers won't have enough water to keep their cattle alive. I overheard plenty of talk in a saloon tonight. It seems the Mungers have publicly promised to set up a regular watering place at the Little Bear for any and all stock in need. The valley people know they haven't any right to expect or hope for such generosity from you. So for the sake of their own interests they'd rather you didn't get the Peace Pipe back. They're willing to be blinded to a lot of things they'd never stand for otherwise."

Jeb slammed a fist into a hard palm. Water! The life blood of the valley. He wanted to provide it in abundance to every farmer and rancher, yet it was being used as a weapon against him by those who would share it in a comparatively niggardly fashion. And it would only jeopardize—perhaps doom to failure—the Steele-Belden irrigation project, should he attempt to turn the tide of public opinion by revealing their plans. Like Toby, no one would believe him.

"I'll have to prove they're wrong about me, then," he said. "Thanks for bucking me up, Matt. For a minute I was almost ready to quit."

"But only for a minute," smiled Steele. "Now we'll start priming our first big gun."

He took a pencil and memorandum book from a pocket. He wrote on a page, tore it out, and handed it to Jeb.

"That's the name and address of the best lawyer in San Francisco," he asserted. "North American's attorney, although that needn't come out, of course. Suppose you hit for Granite City tonight. Wire him to get out here, pronto, and sign my name."

Jeb frowned at the slip of paper. "It'd take me three days at least to make that trip," he objected. "I can't be gone that long."

"Why not? All you'll do here is get into more trouble. And the quicker we start legal machinery turning—"

But Jeb shook his head. "I've got to stick around," he said, "for Toby's sake."

"You really believe Breck means harm to the boy?"

"He has from the start," said Jeb grimly. "He meant all along to kill John Newell, too. When Newell was on his way to see me just happened to be the most opportune time."

Nervously he prowled up and down, coming back at last to sit on the edge of the bed. He said, "It's like this. Breck was legally adopted. He's as much John Newell's lawful heir as Toby. With both of them dead he'd get everything. But he's not satisfied with just the Bar N. He wants the Peace Pipe, too. Only Toby and I stand in his way now. He's going to keep on trying to get rid of us. Maybe if I stay within reach he'll concentrate on me. Maybe I can bait him into exposing his hand before it's too late to save the kid. I owe John Newell that much."

"Then you'd like me to send that wire?"

"If you would."

Steele rubbed his jaw reflectively. At length he heaved a sigh. "All right. And since there's no time to lose, I'll hire a livery stable nag and hit for Granite City right away. But I'm beginning to wonder

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if that tax deal will ever get as far as a court of law. Breck must realize that if it does, he's licked. And your back is vulnerable, Jeb. Remember that!"

"I'll never forget it for a minute!" answered Jeb.

FOR A MOMENT Ann could not remember where she was. Her mind fuzzy with the aftereffects of a sleeping powder, she moved her gaze slowly over the bedroom. A lamp with a low wick burned on a dresser.

She still wore a white gown over her riding skirt and blouse. For the operation she had had to change into white, sterile garments that had belonged to Doc Fallon's wife. . . In a flash Ann remembered everything. This room with its wide, soft bed, ruffled curtains, and cushioned chairs, had been used by Mrs. Fallon, dead two years now.

The ordeal of witnessing surgery had been hard on her. After additional hours of strain, of watching and waiting, the physician had ordered her to rest against further vigils which he could not share. Following the successful removal of the bullet, he had placed the wounded man's chances at fifty-fifty.

Something must have gone wrong, however, for the quiet so necessary to the welfare of a seriously ill patient was being broken. Somewhere beyond closed doors voices were being lifted, as though in anger. Suddenly there was a sharp cry. A heavy, thumping sound followed quickly, and then silence.

Ann threw the blanket aside and slid off the bed. A connecting door opened into John Newell's room. On stockinged feet she padded forward and opened it. Shock struck her motionless. Then everything inside began to sink.

A sheet had been drawn over John Newell's face. He was dead, then. He would never know that she had not betrayed his trust, that Jeb Belden felt no bitterness towards him.

Where was Jeb? Without John Newell's support, how would he come out now?

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Jeb would try harder than ever to prove the drygulcher's identity. He accused Breck, and the accusation was not as far-fetched as appeared on the surface. The relationship between John Newell and his adopted son had not been all it was generally believed. That knowledge had been forced upon her during the course of her four years at the Bar N, living in the same house, eating at the same table. John Newell had reared Breck, and had given lavishly to him through the years in time, attention, and money. He had made him foreman and given him the running of the Bar N more and more into his hands. But he had not loved him, nor felt any gratitude.

Gratitude, however, was a warm emotion, and Breck was cold and strange. In those four years he had not spoken half a dozen unnecessary words to her. Her femininity had been affronted and piqued until she had learned that he was the same with all members of the opposite sex, attractiveness notwithstanding; that he had had no unhappy experience to make him a woman hater.

Breck didn't hate women; they seemed to repel him, which was certainly no normal attitude. Perhaps that abnormal streak would permit Breck to turn unfeelingly upon a friend and benefactor.

THE SOUND of a closing door gave Ann a start. Someone had gone out or come in by the side entrance. Abruptly the eerie stillness of the sheet-covered figure on the bed reached out to her. Hastily she withdrew into the adjoining bedroom and closed the door. She found her boots and pulled them on. A moment later she peered into a narrow hall that led to a living room at one end and a kitchen at the other. A sound of voices came from the back. Ann started towards the kitchen, her footsteps unintentionally noiseless on a thick carpet. Words began to grow intelligible.

". . . all I could do. Belden could have killed him, but he didn't. That impressed the kid, and made him begin to wonder. He asked questions that were hard to answer—kept getting more and more suspicious until

[*Turn page*]

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I saw there was no fooling him any longer. So I let him have the truth. . ."

That was Breck's voice, even and pleasant save for its odd flat half-tone. Involuntarily Ann had halted at the mention of Jeb's name. The remark concerning it registered confusedly. A second voice spoke.

"You sure you only used your fist, boss? That lump's as big as a spud!"

"He hit his head on a stove leg when he fell," explained Breck indifferently. "Makes handling him easier. Soon as Haz gets back, one of you can slip him out of town."

"Not me!" spoke up a third voice hastily. "I feel sorry for the kid."

"If the information Haz brings back is bad, you're liable to get a chance to feel sorrier for yourself," said Breck sardonically.

During this exchange, Ann had edged forward, despite protesting instinct and the sickening pound of her heart. She had stumbled upon something—a revelation too important to be overshadowed by any consideration for personal safety. Beside the kitchen doorway she flattened herself to the wall. Cautiously she leaned forward and gave a quick glance into the room.

Her knees went weak as she shrank again into concealment. In the blue and white kitchen were Breck Newell and two Bar N hands who had always been his special followers. Breck sat at the table, his fingers nervously drumming its oilcloth-covered top. Connor, crooked-nosed and red-headed, leaned against the reservoir end of a cook stove. Ed Sims, small and fat-faced, paced back and forth with something of that rodent's quick, scuttling motion. Toby Newell lay on the floor, tied hand and foot with dish towels and apparently unconscious.

Ann's teeth sank into her lip. Doc Fallon must have been called out on a case or they would not dare make so free with his quarters. They had forgotten her presence; or, more likely, Breck did not believe the sleeping powder she had had would have worn off yet. Ann's hand flew to her throat at a sudden exclamation.

"Here he is!"

She heard the rear door open. As it clicked shut, the rasping voice of Ben Haz-

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litt began to speak in tones of suppressed excitement.

"A stranger come in on this afternoon's stage. He was the one with Belden. Brown corduroy and laced boots. The hotel clerk's description tallies with the kid's. The name he signed on the register was Matthew Steele, from San Francisco."

"What's a stranger from Frisco doing hobnobbing secretly with Jeb Belden" demanded Sims.

"How do you know it was secret?" demanded Connor.

"Why was he in Belden's room at night unless they didn't want to be seen?"

BRECK paid no heed to the argument. "Steele," he repeated. "Matthew Steele. I've heard the old man mention that name. He's someone important, the head of something big . . ."

"North American Development Company," put in Hazlitt unexpectedly. "I've heard of him, too. He'd have money and influence behind him, Breck. How could he tie in with Jeb Belden?"

"I don't know. But we've got to find out before we make any more moves."

"Then somebody'll have to do some riding!" declared Hazlitt. "According to the clerk, he'd just turned in his key. Said he's forgot something important in Granite City and would be right back.

Breck swore. "He and Belden have cooked up something big. That's the only reason Steele would hit for Granite City at this time of night. Haz, Sims—get after him pronto!"

"You mean—"

"No! Not until we find out what we're up against. Take him to the Peace Pipe. We'd better hold Toby there, too. Now clear out of here, all of you. I've got to stick around and put up a good front when the girl wakes up."

Chair legs scraped across the floor, followed by sounds of a general movement towards departure. Terror swept Ann. Unwittingly she had lingered too long, eavesdropping. As she fled down the hall she

[*Turn page*]

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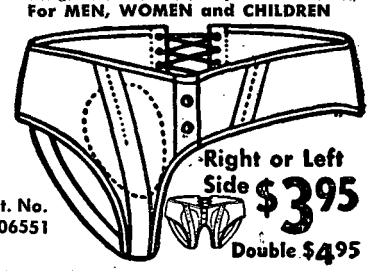

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realized she had little chance of reaching the end of it unseen. Her only hope was to escape through Doc Fallon's office.

A startled cry behind hurried her feet. If only she had retreated sooner, and gone back to the bedroom and pretended to be asleep. Breck might have been fooled, enabling her to slip away later. She sobbed as the door at the end of the hall stuck, resisting her first effort to yank it open. Breck's voice lifted, yelling instructions to his henchmen.

Her mouth was dry and she gasped for breath. Breck had fallen silent behind her, but she heard the thud of his pursuing feet across the uncarpeted floor of Doc Fallon's consulting room and adjacent office. She stumbled over a bench and hurled it into his path. He cursed as it struck his shins.

Then she was bounding across the shabby waiting room and wrenching open the outer door. She felt the coolness of night air in her face. She crossed the threshold and a tall, dark shape loomed suddenly in her path. She had no breath with which to scream. Powerful arms seized and swung her back inside. Despite frenzied struggles, they held her easily; one hard, calloused palm clamped itself over her mouth.

A voice panted, "That was close, boss! She must have heard plenty. What'll we do—take her to the Peace Pipe, too?"

Breck paused in the inner doorway, a hand on each side of the jamb. In the light of a wall lamp his hair was a fair, ruffled crest. His lips were pressed tightly together as though in pain. As their eyes met, it seemed to Ann that pain altered the expression she had so often read in his gaze when he looked at her. Aversion. An inexplicable notion struck her. Aversion for whom? For the first time she wondered if his queer coldness could not hide some black, secret core of suffering and despair—some deep degree of self-loathing . . .

Then she knew she was letting imagination run away with her, for Breck answered Hazlitt's question, and his voice was completely without feeling. "Sure. Take her along. What does one more matter?"

(To be continued in the next issue)

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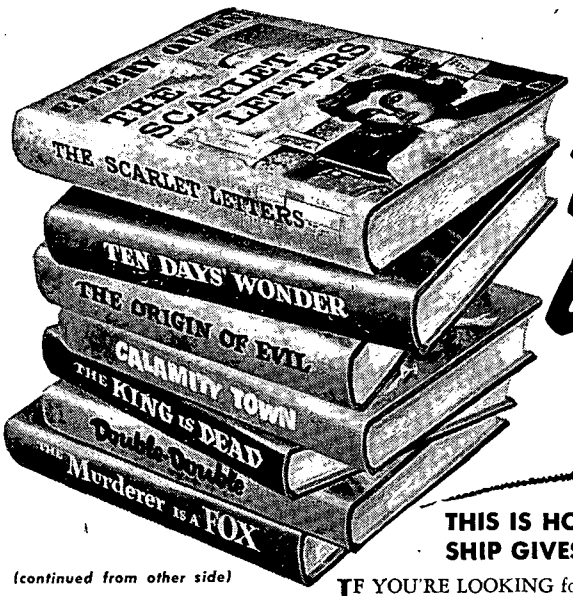

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